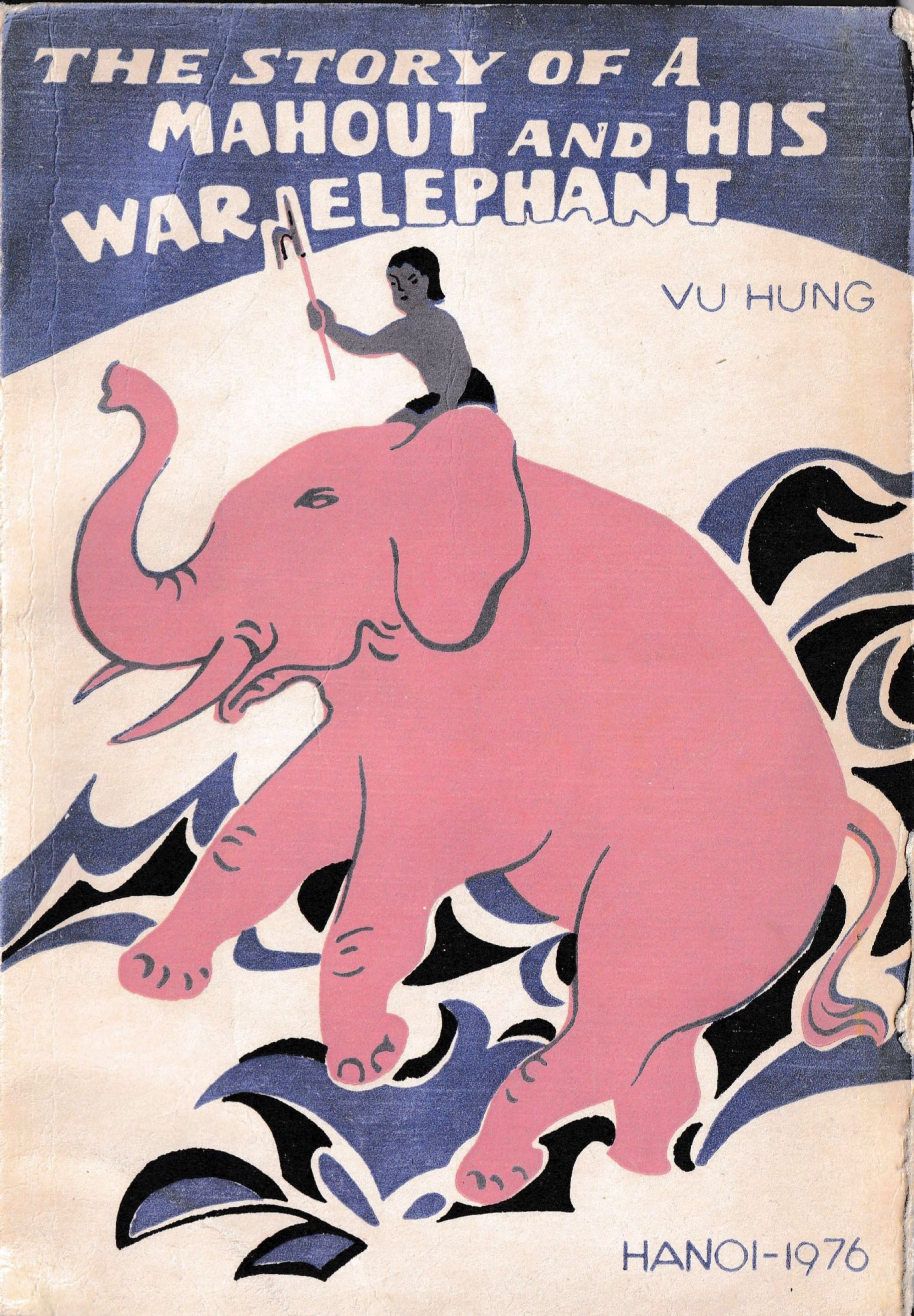
THE STORY OF A MAHOUT AND HIS WAR ELEPHANT

VU HUNG



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To Bun Xon and the
pack elephants on the
Truong Son range

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

It was a chilly night on the Truong Son Range. The sky was clear and bright with so many blue stars, whose incandescent light revealed the existence of big stilted houses nestling here and there among the shadowy trees.

Our platoon had taken shelter in a house much longer than it was wide, and whose dim interior seemed fathomless. The host had already retired for the night, and we found only a man and a little boy by the fire.

We joined them after having spread our rolls. Suddenly noises began below the raised floor — deep — throated, reverberating noises, like those made by a big brass gong. Then a chain rattled loudly, accompanied by a confusion of other sounds.

"That's my elephant," the boy explained, laughing at my discomfiture.

"What makes it so restless ?" I asked.

"Calling for its mates," the man hitherto silent broke in.

"It's going to rain for sure," he added.

Surprised, I looked at the man. He was of middle age, and had only one arm. His face was rather too square, and the stubble on his chin was sparse and rough. The man had a dark complexion, and the eyes he kept fixed on the fire had a somewhat vacant look.

"You the mahout, Comrade?" I queried.

"Yes."

"And this boy?"

"My aid and my son."

I looked away, through the window, into the night, at the immense sky.

"So many stars," I commented.

"Yes, but it'll rain for sure," the man insisted.

"Elephants can smell rain a long way off, you know," he made his point clear. "They always go hunting for new roots and new shoots after a rain. Instinct, you know."

The boy got up, dropped an armful of maize stalks through a hatch in the floor to the animal below.

"Eat your fill, baby," he crooned. "Eat and sleep well. We've a long way to go to-morrow."

Half an hour later, a wind started blowing. Dark clouds wheeled about, blotting out all the stars. Lightning made the frames of the door and window stand out in bright relief. The elephant trumpeted again. The rain began in earnest, beating heavily on the roof.

"Good elephant!" I exclaimed in wonder.

"He's good, all right," the mahout conceded, not without pride. "Very intelligent, too," he went on.

"You don't know him yet, but people around here know him very well. He served in the last war, and is serving in this war, too. Done a lot."

"Tell us something about him, will you?" I ventured timidly. The mahout nodded in agreement. He fed the fire with several big logs. The fire roared merrily while we made ourselves comfortable around the mahout and his son.

One summer day in 1942.

The sun shone with great intensity. Complete silence in the jungle. Not a breath of wind. The trees stood motionless. The air, heated to a white haze, was stifling.

Towards late afternoon, the heat was almost unbearable. People stayed at home instead of going out to work on the terraced fields. Chickens stood gaping by stone mortars or on thresholds. Dogs sprawled on the ground, heads between front paws, tongues lolling, eyes shut tight.

An old Kha[1], Rem, was squatting on the floor, squinting at the sky, or gazing at the dogs, his brows working incessantly.

"Heaven," he groaned. "Big storm coming."

In the park the elephants were getting restless. They swayed wearily, chained to deeply-sunk stakes. From time to time they jerked up their trunks as if to gulp down some air, and blared nervously.

"Just listen to the elephants," the old man mumbled to himself again. "Bet it'll rain heavily."

1. The Kha is a minority ethnic group living in mountains in the western part of Binh Tri Thien province. It includes many sub-groups, the Van Kieu, the Xo, Xek, etc.

He stood up, took a lance down from the wall, and went down the ladder.

"Dik," he called. "Hey Dik!"

A prolonged hoot answered him from the jungle.

"Dik," the old man shouted again, waving the lance towards the place from which the answer had come. "Come here."

A boy emerged from a bush, a crossbow in his hand, a quiver dangling from his waist, his bare brown chest glistening with sweat.

"I must go now," Dik said, casting a regretful look back at the place where he had spent half a day with Srung, his friend, waiting by a squirrels' nest.

"Hush!" A brown face peered out from the bush. "No noise now, or the squirrels won't come in."

"Grand-father called for me. I'm going now."

"Yes. You can go. I'll send you one for your evening soup."

"No, I won't make soup," said Dik with a broad smile, displaying his even, white teeth. "I'll make some roast squirrel for grand-father to wash down with his rice wine."

Winking and nodding at his friend, Dik darted off. Beads of sweat stood out on his glowing face.

He rushed up the ironwood ladder, which was worn to a silky smoothness by time and use. Old Rem took the crossbow and quiver from him, and handed him the lance.

"Go fetch Lekdam, sonny."

"Why don't you let him enjoy a shower ?"

"No shower tonight. Storm's coming."

Dik went down, two rungs at a time. Then, flourishing the lance like a professional mahout, he raced off to the elephant park.

He unchained Lekdam. The old elephant showed its appreciation by caressing the boy's face with the tip of its trunk and rubbing the boy's flanks with its curved tusks. Then, with infinite care, it lapped its trunk around the boy's waist, lifted him up, and gently placed him on its broad back.

Dik straddled the huge animal and prodded its neck with the lance.

"Pei ! Pei"[1] he orderred, assuming the tone of a grown-up.

At a stately pace Lekdam started off, dragging along a length of chain.

Other people were coming to take their elephants home. The village became unusually animated. Elephants were trumpeting. Children were running madly about, throwing up their arms as if they were trying to embrace the rising wind.

The wind was gathering strength, becoming stronger and stronger at each gust. At the now deserted elephant park, dry grass was blown about. Blown about were also the birds in their desperate flight for home. The sky darkened. Suddenly clouds were ripped up by lightning. Then, hardly had the children reached shelter when the rain broke loose, spilling great torrents on the bamboo roofs. Trees swayed drunkenly. They began to look ragged with their leaves falling in great quantities.

The floor-boards of Old Rem's house, secured though they were to sturdy ironwood pillars, were

1. "Go ! Go !" in the Lao language. Lao is spoken by mahouts on the Truong Son Range. The reason is that the first elephants were bought from Lao people. Today even newly domesticated elephants are given Lao names and spoken to in the Lao language, as a reminder of the old practice.

heaving and shaking as though they would jerk loose any moment.

Old Rem raked the fire, sending up leaping flames. On the wall his shadow and his grand-son's quivered for a long moment.

A thunderbolt crashed somewhere high up on the mountain. So loud was the noise that it seemed to come from just above the roof. Then, there were more noises, a prolonged rumbling.

"Landslide," the old man whispered.

Straining their ears they could hear rocks falling and rolling, trees crashing, animals howling in fear.

"Landslide," Old Rem repeated, awed by the ruthless strength of nature.

He and the boy picked their way to the window and looked out. There was a blinding flash of lightning followed immediately by another deafening roar. In that brief instant they saw something like a wide road running down the slope, and they could discern very large rocks charging down that path.

Amidst this orgy of unearthly sounds they could make out the braying of frightened elephants.

"Wild elephants," remarked Dik in a whisper.

"Yes, wild elephants," agreed the old man, always attentive.

This was not unusual in Takhan. At the beginning of the rainy season, when young plants were sprouting everywhere on mountain slopes and in the fields, wild elephants would leave their mountain dens for food. They moved around all the time, going wherever it was raining. This had been their way from time immemorial.

From below, Lekdam was beating its trunk against the floor. The other elephants in the neighbourhood were also stamping impatiently. Then they started trumpeting and pulling at their fetters.

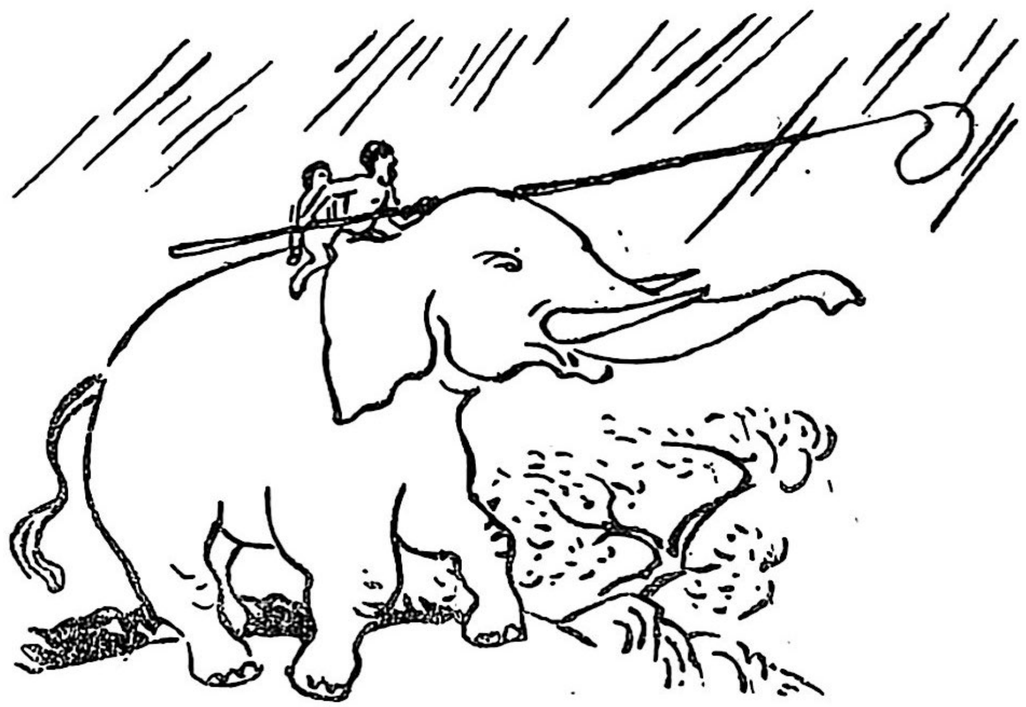
From somewhere at the farthest end of the village, a gong resounded, and soon gongs were heard everywhere, their metallic reverberations drowning the wail of the wind. People were signaling the presence of wild beasts. The village woke up, on the alert.

The pack of wild elephants was approaching. Their high-pitched cries had an undeniably ferocious quality. They could be heard stamping heavily. Soon they came into sight, big black shapes lumpering in the night. Wherever they went trees shook. But they disappeared quite soon. Their stampings were lost in the howling wind.

Long afterwards, the old man and Dik heard one lone elephant heading for the village. Its heavy feet made loud splashes where water had gathered. The animal paused every now and then as if it were feeling its way.

Old Rem and Dik saw it now.

"A stray elephant," the old man exclaimed with great excitement. Then, as agile as a squirrel, he made a leap to the place in the wall where a gong was hanging. He waited until the stray elephant had reached the village clearing, then gave a quick succession of blows on the gong.



Dik, without being told, threw open the door, beside which a coil of *min*[1] rope was lying.

Rain lashed furiously in their faces. Dik jumped down onto the ground, went to Lekdam, and unchained the animal. The old man meanwhile had rolled the coil of rope to the edge of the floor. As Lekdam was rising up on its knees with the boy sitting on the hump of its back, the old man let both the coil and himself drop down on to its immense neck. He took his seat in front, his knees pressed against the back of its ears. He held in his hands a long pole, whose narrower end was connected with a sliding noose formed by the loose end of the coil.

1. Wild buffalo hide.

Old Rem's signal had been heard throughout the village. Now people were beating their gongs in answer and elephants were being taken out.

Excited by rain and the general activity Lekdam set out at a gallop to the village gate. Its trunk raised to the falling drops of rain, it was gaining fast on the stray elephant. The latter, sensing danger, trundled off, limping on one hind-leg. It must have been wounded during the landslide. This was a calf-elephant but of the size of a grown male. At one moment, when it turned back to look at its pursuers, Dik had a glimpse of a pair of fairly long tusks.

"What an elephant!" the boy exclaimed in wonder.

Old Rem slapped hard on Lekdam's neck, urging it to put on more speed. The elephant put on a sprint, and soon it was closing on the fugitive.

There was a flash of lightning. Old Rem got one hind-leg of the wild elephant in the noose.

"Pay out the rope," he shouted to Dik as he dropped to the ground. Dik fumbled with the coil for one awkward moment, but finally succeeded in rolling it off Lekdam's back. The calf, meanwhile, continued to run, taking up the slack. The old man paid out more rope, and secured the free end to a tree.

The stray elephant stopped short. It tried to free itself, causing the taut rope to vibrate with force. Old Rem, having driven a stake into the ground to strengthen the rope, regained his place on Lekdam's neck.

On his order, Lekdam approached the calf. It cowered, crying for rescue. It also attempted to defend itself, but gave up the idea and tried to retreat. The domestic elder, probably moved by so much youthful inexperience, gave several consoling pats with its trunk on the calf's back. Then moving forward quickly, it pushed the calf against a big tree and, flinging out its massive trunk, took hold of the trunk of the young elephant.

A couple of other mahouts were rushing up with their animals to give a hand. They made all sort of noises, both threatening and reassuring while circling the wild elephant at bay. Then, with more ropes, they tied the captive fast to a tree.

When Lekdam finally released its hold on the calf, it was almost midnight and the storm was almost spent.

Back home Old Rem fed more wood to the dying fire, and sat down again beside it with his grandson. He rolled himself a big cigar, lighted it, took a long puff, and inhaled luxuriously.

* * *

Rem had sweated and sweated for years before he managed to acquire an elephant of his own. That was when he was young. He followed hunters in their yearly journeys to the western side of the Truong Son Range. A couple of elephants were the most a hunting season could yield, while there were always more hunters than elephants to share out.

So priority was given to seniors, and Rem had to wait for eight years before his turn came.

When it was allotted to Rem, Lekdam was no longer in its prime although it was still all muscle.

Thanks to it, Rem's family fared much better. Rem and his son, Dik's father, used to take it to the mountains to clear land for cultivation or to haul timber. It was also used to carry salt and other commodities to Laos or to remote villages in the southern highlands.

Now Lekdam was old. Like its master, it could not be of much use. And it had been the wish of Old Rem's son, who with his young wife had died in an epidemic of fever, that Dik be given a new elephant to take the place of the ageing Lekdam.

The request had kept Old Rem sleepless many a night. He blamed himself for his failure to provide property for his only grand-son. What would happen to the boy if the legacy he inherited should consist solely of the ageing elephant ?

The stray calf, therefore, was regarded as a miraculous piece of luck. The old man, dreaming of the prosperity and happiness of his grand-son, burned to feast his eyes on their newly-acquired property. He decided to tame the animal as quickly as possible.

As for Dik he was speechless with joy. His mind was racing. "Lekdam is old now," he thought. "It's time to retire him. He's worked so many years for Granddad. It will be too old in five or six years.

Granddad should turn him loose [1], as Old Pa has released his one-tusked elephant. His place will be taken by the young elephant."

Dik thought he was dreaming, but the contrary was proved by the captive's continual bleating, to which he listened with great satisfaction.

Dik also thought of Srung, his friend. Srung's father had died before he could get his family an elephant. Srung must be sound asleep now, and probably had known nothing yet about Dik's sudden fortune. But Dik was certain his friend would be very pleased when the news was broken to him. "He'll rush to me and say, 'How lucky you are'," Dik thought. "And he will give me a hand too, and I'll ask Granddad to let him feed and groom the elephant with me."

The wind, which had been hissing through the many cracks in the wall, was dying down. An occasional flash of lightning or a roll of thunder in the far distance was the only reminder of the great storm of the evening before. Somewhere, at the edge of the jungle, early birds were already twittering.

The birds put an end to the old man's musing.

"I had to toil and moil for eight years before I could have an elephant," he told the boy, giving him a warm, loving smile. "Now a calf-elephant has come to us. It's like discovering a treasure. So what about calling him Khamtok ? It's

1. Unlike horses, old elephants are not killed, but are turned loose in the jungle.

yours to keep, and I want to give him a really beautiful name."

"Does Khamtok mean treasure ?" Dik's eyes were shining

"Yes, sonny. Do you like it ?"

"Treasure," the boy thought aloud. "But the elephant is more than a treasure, Granddad. I want a more suitable name."

They both thought in silence for some time, the old man raking his mind for something better, the boy looking at his grand-father for inspiration.

"I've got an idea. Granddad," Dik clapped his hands. "What about Storm ? He came to us during a storm, didn't he ?"

The old man was taken aback.

"No. I'd rather not," he said after a while. "It doesn't sound right. It'll bring misfortune."

A peaceful life was what the old man wanted for his grand-son and the new elephant. So why call the animal Storm. He believed the name would get its bearer into trouble.

"It'll bring misfortune," he insisted.

"Why misfortune, Granddad," Dik was stubborn. "What I mean is that the elephant will be as strong as a storm, and will be of great use for us in working the fields and felling trees. Just wait and see."

And Dik was already imagining himself, straddling the young elephant, now completely broken in. In his mind's eye he saw him uprooting tough undergrowth with his powerful trunk and toppling big trees by driving his head at them. No obstacle would

be too great for him. Dik would also go hunting with him. Sitting securely on his neck he would fear nothing, not even the deadliest reptiles or the most ferocious man-eating predators. The more he thought the more he found Storm appropriate.

"Don't you see how strong the elephant is ?" Dik tried another approach. "And he came during a storm. I don't see why he shouldn't be called just that."

"Well, it's up to you." The old man was weakening. He had never refused his grand-son anything. Somehow he could not come to like the name. "So, let it be Lomluong, as it is said in Lao ? Are you pleased now ?"

Dik smiled broadly and nodded his head energetically. To show his gratitude he flung his arms about the old man's legs.

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* *

It was still dark when Old Rem went out to see the village chief and to notify him of the event. A home, he got together the most valuable things he had — several bear's gall-bladders, a couple of deer antlers, a few monkey skeletons, and a number of fine pelts. He went down to the market with the lot, which he sold for silver coins(1). He needed cash to stand a treat to his fellow-mahouts

1. In those days, mountaineers preferred silver money to bank-notes.

and to pay the village chief and people in high places.

Hardly had he left when Srung turned up. The boy got up on the big stone mortar below the house and gave three light knocks on the underside of the floor. Above Dik was still sleeping soundly. He had stayed awake almost the whole night. Srung knocked again, harder this time. Dik woke up. Recognizing the signal he rushed down.

"I bet you don't know yet," he said at once, giving his friend no time to speak. "Granddad captured a stray elephant last night."

"I knew. I heard the gongs. I heard the elephant. I knew everything."

"Granddad gave him to me. He's mine now".

The boys, hand in hand, skipped merrily to the park. It was not yet quite light. A few stars were blinking in the milky sky. The branches were riding a gentle breeze. Only the captured elephant remained motionless. It neither bellowed nor struggled, tired as it was.

The boys gazed at it in wonder. In the half-light they tried to make out its features.

"I don't know what's wrong with my stomach." Dik told his friend. "I didn't sleep a wink the whole night, and I couldn't eat anything either, not even the meat Granddad roasted for me !"

"That's because you're happy. You feel queer when you're happy."

"And you ? Aren't you happy, too ?"

"Of course, I am happy even though the elephant isn't mine."

It was true that Srung was not envious, although his family had no elephant, not even an old one like Lekdam. To the villagers, not to have an elephant was a disadvantage, even a grave misfortune.

Dik was moved by the thought, and he felt his joy selfish. Srung had no grand-father to look after him. A loving grand-father meant a lot.

"I'll ask Granddad to let you take care of the elephant with me," Dik offered generously, wrapping his arms about his friend's shoulders. "When we grow up we'll share him too. We'll let him join the herd in the village, and we'll even get one for you."

Now began the taming of the wild elephant.

Old Rem and the boys would ride Lekdam to the place were the captive was chained, and the boys would drop at Lomluong's feet shreds of tender banana stems and bundles of fragrant grass.

At first Lomluong just ignored the food. Then, unable to resist the pangs of hunger, it picked up some grass and slowly chewed it.

The old man and the boys meanwhile were singing high praises of their newly-acquired treasure. What a magnificent calf. It was flawless. A high, stubborn forehead; a pair of intelligent eyes; a neat, delicate head. The tusks, hefty and smooth, were like two sappy bamboo shoots. The trunk, articulate, was as deft as a human hand. The feet,

nimble though big, promised great endurance. "He'll be much better even than Lekdam in his youth," the old man chuckled.

Each feeding took several hours, but Old Rem and the boys had no objection to this: they could never admire the elephant too much. Then, the old mahout would order Lekdam to close in and lock the young elephant's rebellious trunk in its own, while Dik and Srung dismounted to administer balm to the wound on Lomluong's leg.

The wound having healed, a chain was put on Lomluong's hindleg. The elephant was marched by Old Rem and some other mahouts to the clearing and chained to a stake, where it stood swaying languidly waiting for food. But its mood would sometimes change. There were times when he would not touch anything, but just remained as motionless as a rock. Perhaps it was thinking of the old herd and the old days in freedom. It looked forlornly in the direction of the jungle and gave long, sad complaining brays. The boys were greatly alarmed, because it had been known that elephants had actually died of grief.

"There's no cause for fear," Old Rem would assure them. "Lomluong is young. Unlike old elephants, he will get used to us."

The elephant would strain its trunk and sniff at the stake. No scents of the wilderness. Only human scents, mostly the scents of human sweat, everywhere, on everything, — the stake, the chain, the foot-prints on the ground. At this the elephant would become mad. It lashed at the chain. It lifted

its trunk threateningly at people; it hissed and grunted.

It was still a beast of the wild.

One late afternoon at meal-time, heavy foot-falls were heard coming from the clearing.

"Elephant gone wild!" Someone was shouting.

Dik and Srung rushed out. They were thoroughly scared by the sight that met their eyes. Lomluong had broken his chain and was giving chase to Old Rem. The trunk curled up, the eyes blood-shot in the setting sun, the elephant galloped madly behind the old man. Its heavy feet raised big clouds of dust.

Old Rem weaved his way among the trees for some time. Then, cutting a straight line, he made for an open place. His intention was obvious — to get to the old elephant, which was turning round on its chain in a frantic attempt to come to the rescue of its master.

Lomluong was gaining fast on the old man. Several times it threw out its trunk but somehow the old man managed to dodge it.

Meanwhile Dik had run home for a lance. Now he tried to cut in between the mad elephant and his grand-father. The elephant, caring little for the tiny human being and his frail weapon, moved on, irresistible as a rolling rock.

Looking on, Srung did not know what to do. Then the light from a nearby fire gave him an idea. He made a sprint for the fire and returned with a flaming brand which he flung at the head of the oncoming elephant, just in time to save the old man from its trunk.

Alarmed, the elephant made a sudden sideways lunge, which almost threw it off balance.

A dozen mahouts meanwhile had arrived with their elephants. One made his animal kneel down to receive Old Rem and the two boys, while the others set out after the rebel who had changed course and was now heading for the jungle.

The old man, breathing heavily, congratulated the boys on their courage. Then, receiving a lance from the leading mahout, he took his place in front and prodded the elephant into a quick gallop with the rest of the party.

Soon the rebel was stopped and surrounded. A dozen trunks reached out for it. In a jiffy, its trunk and legs were caught and locked.

The punishment began.

One mahout, riding a powerful bull, came forward. "Savage beast!" he roared, his eyes ablaze with wrath. "How dare you turn against your master?"

"Give it to him, and hard," he ordered. His mount, equally angry, began flailing the victim's chest with its enormous trunk.

A second mahout took his turn and was followed by a third. Lomluong took his punishment with resignation.

The animal's stoic attitude softened Old Rem.

"Stop, please," he pleaded, holding up his lance for attention.

The mahout who was directing his own share of the punishment would hear none of this. He urged his elephant to go on.

"Please, that's enough," Dik added his plea to his grand-father's.

"Yes, that's enough," Old Rem echoed again.

Srung was on the verge of tears. He looked around for sympathy.

But the mahout was adamant.

"Don't you see, you had a narrow escape ?" Someone insisted to Old Rem.

"Let's beat this savage habit out of it," another added.

"It should not be allowed to set a bad example to the other elephants."

"This only serves it right."

Blows meanwhile continued to rain on Lomluong, which began groaning softly.

Dik was weeping bitterly now. "Stop, please," he sobbed. "He's badly hurt."

The sight of the elephant and the boys was too much for Old Rem. An experienced mahout, he knew that excessive severity would not do any good to an elephant which could take just punishment without flinching.

"Enough's enough, friends," he said firmly.

"Come, let's stop for the sake of Rem and the children," another elderly mahout intervened.

The mahout who was punishing Lomluong brought his lance sharply down on the neck of his mount. "Stop !" he snapped.

Dik and Srung were heartily relieved. They jumped down to the ground, ran away, and returned a moment later with a solid chain.

Old Rem also dismounted to help the boys put the chain on Lomluong, which was then marched back to the clearing and secured again to the stake.

Before Lomluong was left to itself, Dik stepped forward.

"A moment, please," he told the mahout whose elephant was keeping a hold on Lomloung's trunk.

Dik tiptoed up to his elephant, and spoke softly into its ear, "Don't ever be naughty again, Lomluong. Can't you see that we are your friends and are good to you ?"

And he ran his hands soothingly over the bruised chest of the animal.

A few days later, after Lomluong had returned to its normal docile and dignified self the old man and the boys began trying to win its confidence. They spent whole days with it, feeding it, calling its name. Sometimes they formed a circle around it, singing an old song, Old Rem mumbling the word in his throat, the boys shouting at the top of their voices.

Little elephant, my little elephant,
Don't ever get mad,
Never run away,
Stay and let's make friends.
Mornings we give you food
Maize and young shoots,
Grass and roots,
Leaves and fruit.

Noons we take you home,
Into the shade, into the coolness,
Where you can play,
Where you can rest.

The young elephant showed great impatience at first. It stamped its feet, jerked its trunk, or grunted menacingly. Like all other elephants in the early stage of captivity, it had an innate dislike of human scents and human voices.

The old man and the boys, however, were not easily discouraged. They kept walking around the elephant, feeding it, calling its name, singing.

Little elephant, my little elephant,
Don't return to the mountains.
Never go away.
Stay and play with us...

Days grew into months. The elephant could not beat Old Rem and the boys for patience. Moreover, time had a soothing effect on it. It began to flap its ears whenever its name was mentioned.

Old Rem decided it was time to break the elephant into human scents.

With Dik and Srung keeping watch from Lekdam's back, their lances at the ready, Old Rem approached Lomluong, a bucket of salted water in one hand, a lance in the other, his eyes fixed on those of the elephant.

Lomluong pulled back and lifted his trunk. Onlookers, including Dik and Srung on Lekdam and a few mahouts who happened to be around, held their breath.

The old man ordered Lomluong to stay still while he made several cautious steps forward. The elephant, its trunk still poised, began showing signs of uneasiness, and when the old man pricked the trunk in a very swift movement, it emitted a short grunt and drew back with a look of alarm.

Old Rem set the bucket down.

"Drink," he ordered. "It's good for you."

The elephant plunged its trunk deep into the bucket and took a quick draught. Then, as quickly, it threw up its trunk unaccustomed to the taste of salt. The second sip, however, was taken with some appreciation, and the elephant squinted quizzically at the old man. Soon Lomluong was drinking with gusto, playfully waving its trunk at the old man after each gulp.

After several such sessions, when he was assured of the elephant's disposition to be friendly the old man allowed the children to have a try. The latter, armed with lances, brought the bucket close to the elephant.

They saw the elephant put the tip of its trunk into its mouth, and knew what it was up to.

"Don't be naughty," Dik shrieked with delight when the elephant started spraying them.

This was just for fun. Lomluong had already accepted the children's friendship. It let down its trunk and waited for them, body swaying, eyes blinking. "Come here, brave boys. Come to me," it seemed to be saying. When the children came

within reach, it snatched the bucket from their hands and drank eagerly to their great amusement.

Its drink finished, the elephant sniffed at the boys. The children were besides themselves with joy. They caressed the friendly trunk that was licking at the sweat on their bodies.

Plans were then made to train the elephant to work.

"Do we have to burn holes behind his ears, must we do it?" the children asked with foreboding. "He has such splendid ears."

"No, we don't have to. Lomluong deserves better than that," Old Rem reassured them.

A common practice among mahouts was to burn two holes — more precisely to inflict two permanent wounds — behind an elephant's ears to make it sensitive to punishment.

But Old Rem had his own method. He had cured the ear wounds on Lekdam, in spite of warnings by fellow-mahouts. He loved his elephant. He would not hurt it.

"What if he goes wild?" the children asked again.

"Listen, boys," Old Rem reasoned. "A mahout who only knows where to plunge his lance is not a good mahout. Kindness is more effective than lance and chain put together. Animals, like human beings, resent harsh treatment. Remember the story of the elephant which took revenge on its master?' '

Of course the children remembered the story, having heard it so many times. The old man could also remember every word of it, and could still

recall the conversation taking place many years ago between him and the Lao mahout who had first told the story to him.

It was thus: "There was a young mahout of great skill. He changed elephants frequently, before he finally found one to his liking. It was a very intelligent bull. The animal was very efficient, and the mahout made a lot of money with it. To do him justice, he was not unkind to his elephant. But he took to drinking, and you can't expect a drunken man to be kind and just. So, every time he got drunk he beat and cursed his elephant. As his drinking bouts became more frequent, there was no end to the elephant's misery. Finally he began to develop an unreasonable hatred of the animal. One day he made it haul a load of timber too heavy for its strength, however the animal succeeded in hauling it."

"What would you have done yourself?" the Lao mahout had asked young Rem at this point.

"I'd have rewarded the elephant. I'd have given him an armful of sugar cane or a bucket of rice soup."

"The same with me," the Lao mahout said approvingly "We should never forget the services of our elephants."

"I would almost say the great favours they do us," Rem corrected.

"You're right," the story-teller conceded with a smile. "Now, this mahout, instead of rewarding his elephant, went out for a drink, leaving the animal

alone, without food. The next time he went to it, the elephant gave him a warning blow with its trunk. The mahout should have understood the danger sign. When your elephant doesn't love you any more, that means danger. But, instead of taking the hint... and beginning to undo the wrongs he had been doing, the mahout re-opened the wounds behind the elephant's ears, into which he would viciously dig his lance every time the elephant disobeyed his unreasonable orders. Even animals prefer reason, don't they ? So, one day, after it had been unchained the elephant gave its master one long look and roared angrily. The mahout did not expect this. "What are you up to ? Seeking trouble ? he drawled drunkenly, and reached behind his back for his lance. But the lance was not there, and his face went white. He wheeled about and ran. Too late. The elephant had flung out its trunk and lunged forward. The man was caught around his waist, hurled up into the air, and impaled on the upraised tusks as he fell down. His body was never found. The elephant had run with it into the jungle."

Old Rem believed the story was no more than a fable. A thoroughly tamed elephant would never kill anyone, much less its master. But all the same he liked the story for its moral, and had all his life scrupulously acted on the advice derived from it. Now he wanted to drive home to the children the truth that training without kindness would achieve nothing.

So it was decided that no ear wound would be inflicted on Lomluong.

To make the elephant used to riders, loads of gradually increasing weights were put on its back. Lomluong balked at first, trying to throw everything off. But by dint of patience the old man and his aids succeeded in breaking the animal into this habit. Then they began taking their places on its neck.

The next step was much more difficult and exhausting. The elephant was taken to the clearing very early in the morning before it had eaten, for a full stomach would induce sluggishness of both body and mind.

To make it kneel and get up on orders, ropes were attached to its trunk and forelegs. The loose ends of the ropes were held by Dik and Srung sitting on the animal's back together with the old man. The free space on the howdah was filled with sugar cane.

"Khuc Khau" the old man would say, and Dik would pull the leg ropes. This was repeated several times before Lomluong knew what was expected of it. At the next order, it would bend first its forelegs and then its hindlegs, learning to crouch down. The old man would then jump to the ground and throw some sugar cane to the elephant.

"Nhun Khun" was the order to get up. When this was given, Srung would give a slight tug to the trunk rope. The elephant caught the hint instantly. It stood up, first on its hindlegs, then on its forelegs. It was rewarded with more sugar cane.

Lomluong showed great intelligence. He was very quick at grasping the meanings of " Khuc Khau"

and "Nhun Khun" and soon could execute the orders without the prompting of the ropes. Old Rem, for his part, always gave it just and reasonable treatment — scoldings for its mistakes, but generous rewards for progress.

For the lessons on steering, ropes were attached to the elephant's ears. At the command "Buong Xai" Dik would give a jerk to the left rope, Srung on the other side would pull the right one when the old man shouted, "Bung Khoa". The elephant learnt to react correctly to the signals, without much difficulty.

Lomluong developed a special liking for these outings, during which it could fare sumptuously and was free of all fetters. It was evidently bored by inactivity, and to show this, it would rattle the chain fussily, or when food was brought in, would flap its ears, wag its trunk, and stamp its feet. "Hey, little friends. What about some fun now," it seemed to say.

The actual domestication of Lomluong had begun the first summer of his captivity when cuckoos, coming for the ripening litchi, were filling the jungle with their musical reiteration. It had continued into the cold months and into the next spring. By the time the noisy cuckoos were back again, Lomluong was completely tamed. It could carry out all orders without prompting, caring little for rewards.

Come winter, Lomluong would join the other working elephants of the village. Old Rem had

prepared for it two solid chains and a thick breast-pad made of canvas. He also put Dik and Srung directly in charge of its health and well-being.

He entertained great hopes of his young favourite.

And Lomluong, for its part, had become very much attached to its masters, particularly Dik, who regarded it as a dear friend.

Everybody was looking forward to the day when Lomluong would be granted the status of a full grown work elephant.

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In the course of the next two years Lomluong learned every trick of its trade. It worked with great efficiency, and was allotted pay equal to the wages of two skilled timbermen. Thanks to its work, Lekdam the old elephant had more rest, old Rem and his grand-son, and even the family of Srung, became better off.

After work Dik and Srung would take the elephant for a bathe in a swift river at the foot of the mountain. Dik, taking the place of the mahout, occupied the front seat while Srung, the "aid", sat at the back. Riding such a well-groomed elephant in such a professional manner Dik and Srung were the envy of the village lads. Their manners too were perfect. They would greet people politely, Dik waving the borrowed lance, Srung nodding and smiling.

Old Rem, a home-made cigar between his lips, would proudly watch them from the door of their house. How could one help taking pride in such fine boys. The women would also stop pounding rice when the boys rode past. They hoped they might have sons like these.

"I must get a lance for Dik," the old man told himself. "He could qualify as a mahout very soon, though a little too small for his age. Srung is also very good. He is second to none in the whole village as an aid".

Old Rem had not been well lately, and had had to stay at home quite often. Dik could not work alone, because be had not yet been entrusted with a lance, the utmost symbol of authority over the elephant, of competence, and of the trust of fellow-mahouts.

After much thought Old Rem decided to apply for a lance for his grand-son. He presented the village chief with the three customary silver piastres, and gave a party for the other mahouts.

His request came as a surprise to all, but they complied with it in consideration of his seniority and his declining health.

To gain the lance Dik would have to undergo a tough test set by Old Pa, the eldest of the mahouts unanimously appointed as the leading authority. If he could stand the test, Dik would be granted the much coveted status of mahout.

He was given three months to prepare. How happy he was at the prospect of becoming a regular mahout working for his own village. But his heart was filled with anxiety when he thought of the test, which no doubt would be very severe. So, despite his self-confidence, the boy worked himself to exhaustion with the elephant. He suddenly became taciturn, cared little for food and sleep. He even gave up the daily parade through the village.

Seeing that his grand-son was over-working the old man became alarmed. He made up his mind to call on Old Pa. "He's an old friend," Old Rem thought. "Perhaps he will give us a few hints, which could save the boy a lot of trouble."

Old Rem set out with a gift — four bear paws and several ounces of tiger bone jelly. Having reached Old Pa's, however, he could not make up his mind to enter. "The rules aren't made that could

keep my grand-son from becoming a mahout. If he is to have a lance, let him qualify on his own. I can't live for ever to be his keeper. If he fails he can wait another year. I shall not make a laughing-stock of myself."

Back home, he tried to impart to his grand-son whatever he had learned in his long life. Now that Dik had learned the rudiments of the trade, he must be taught how to cope with complex situations.

He trained Dik in coupling elephants for big loads, in mixing his animal with a new herd. He told the boy about the customs of the neighbouring regions. He gave instruction on the symptoms of common elephant diseases, and initiated his grand-son into the art of traditional medicine. He also revealed to Dik the mysteries of elephant habits.

The three months allowed for the preparations went by in a blur of activity. The morning of the test was announced by the sounding of gongs. People packed the clearing out of sheer curiosity; never before had a mere child applied for the job of a mahout. To the village urchins the test had a particular significance. They had been more or less envious of Dik, but now they prayed for his success. They would share the glory of Dik's accession to the lance, and grown-ups would have a different idea about boys from now on.

Old Rem began the great day by getting up very early. He set about trimming the hair of Dik and Srung, and preparing for Dik a hot bath of scented water. He polished Dik's hair with vegetable oil, and even lent the boy his satchel made of tiger skin

and his jungle knife the handle of which he had carved out of a deer antler.

Srung was beside himself. "Oh Dik, you look tremendous," he raved. "Old Pa must be impressed. I bet he will instantly make you mahout as soon as he sees you."

All the mahouts were present for the occasion. Their elephants, adorned with gorgeous carpets, behaved with unusual dignity. They, too, were aware of the solemnity of the occasion.

The crowd made room for Lomluong as it entered the park .The calf was to be put through the test as much as was Dik. If it succeeded, it would be recognized an equal of the other elephants.

Dik made Lomluong go down on its knees, and all the three riders alighted. Old Rem and Srung mingled with the crowd while Dik walked Lomluong to the centre, his face ablaze with self-consciousness under the gaze of so many curious eyes.

"Chin up, son," Old Rem called after him. "You're almost a mahout now."

Dik bowed deeply to Old Pa. Then, raising his bright eyes to the patriach he said huskily, "I await your command, Ancient."

Old Pa acknowledged Dik's introduction with a warm smile and solemnly took his place on a big tree stump. He looked majestic with his hoary hair and brows. Behind him, village lads, clad in multicoloured loin-cloths, stood at the ready beside a row of gongs and drums.

Old Pa raised an arm, and the gong-players and drummers went into action, filling the air with rhythmic reverberations. One mahout, at this signal, made his way in, leading a sickly-looking elephant by its trunk.

"Dik," Old Pa called out with authority. "A good mahout must know how to restore health to his elephant. Let's see if you can cure this one."

The sick elephant was making gargling sounds in its throat. Its waterly eyes moved imploringly from Dik to the people standing round. Every now and then it bent its head and lashed its trunk at its belly which was twitching spasmodically. Saliva was dribbling from its sagging mouth.

"Colic," Dik thought. But he did not want to jump to conclusions. His grand-father had often warned him against hasty diagnosis. "If you are not careful, your elephant may become sicker."

Old Rem and Srung were holding their breath. The old man clenched his teeth on his dead pipe and assumed a guilty look: he had actually clean forgotten to tell his grand-son about this very common ailment.

Dik meanwhile continued to examine the sick elephant. His attention was caught by the many bites on the animal's body, bites over which blood and mud had caked. Then an idea struck him: the elephant must have been bitten by blood-sucking jungle leeches and could even have swallowed quite a few. No wonder it was trying to vomit.

Lekdam had once experienced the same ailment, and Old Rem had cured it by giving it some

makdam fruit to eat. Lekdam had twitched and heaved in the same manner. Its body had also been covered with bites.

"I'd say the elephant has swallowed some leeches. Ancient," Dik said, bowing respectfully.

Outside Old Rem gave a long sigh of relief. He winked at his grand-son approvingly.

"Good. Now give the elephant some medicine," Old Pa told Dik. His order was accompanied by a new burst from the gongs and drums.

Dik went off to the communal herb garden, where medicinal plants of all kinds were grown. He ran lightly as if his legs had wings. He picked a dozen fruit from a *makdam* plant, crushed them and squeezed the juice into a jar. Back at the park, he prised open the mouth of the elephant and emptied the jar down its throat.

It was not long before the elephant's belly contracted violently. The animal spread its legs, bent its head, curled its trunk. From its mouth cud oozed out, red with blood. Several bloated leeches were wriggling out of the mess.

The gongs and drums came to life again. The village urchins looking on were mad with joy. The mahouts flourished their lances in approval.

Dik was then instructed to couple Lomluong to an elephant notorious in the whole village for its stubbornness, and to make the pair haul a heavy log around the clearing. Assuming an air of severe authority, he ordered Lomluong to head the log into position with the assistance of the other

elephant and its master. This done he made the animals take their places side by side while the aids attached them to the load. He gave a signal, and both elephants strained themselves for the start. Lomluong began to pull, but the other elephant would not budge an inch from its place.

Dik gave a sign to the other mahout, who with great force, brought the broad side of his lance down on the neck of his elephant.

"Go on pulling, Lomluong," Dik prodded his mount.

Lomluong strained forward, dragging the other elephant along. The latter tried to swerve aside, but Lomluong was quicker. Clutching the balking elephant's trunk in its own, it forced the truant to return to the right course. The other animal gave in. The chains became taut. The log slid forward without a hitch.

"You're almost a mahout now, Dik," Old Pa declared in his ringing voice. "The only thing you need now is a wild buffalo for your rope. Then you'll have your lance and be allowed to join the other mahouts in all debates. You'll be allowed to work independently with an aid of your own choice."

The patriach turned round and gave a sign for the hunt to start. Gongs and drums again sounded out, this time joined by hunting horns. In a moment all the elephants in the village had gathered in the clearing. On their backs sat village lads armed with lances and crossbows.

Mahout Dik now sat well forward on the neck of Lomluong, holding the lance his grand-father had lent him. Just behind him, in the seat of the aid, sat Old Rem with an armful of lances. Srung was the third member of the team, as the hunter's mate. According to hunting rules a hunter must be accompanied by a mate of his own age. Dik had reserved this special honour for his friend. Now he turned back to Srung, rewarding him with a warm smile and some special promise in his shining eyes.

The elephants were amusing themselves by thrusting their tusks into the air, flapping their ears, raising their trunks and shooting them forward suddenly.

Then, excited by the hunting music, they started champing to be off.

"Where shall we take the new mahout?" one of the riders addressed Old Pa.

"To Salt Hills,"[1] the latter replied at once indicating the direction with his lance.

The elephants were set in motion. Thick clouds of dust were raised by their heavy feet.

Each year when a new mahout was appointed Old Pa would lead a hunt into the wild buffalo country.

His elephant was in the forefront, followed by Lomluong. The rest strung out behind. To rousing cheers from the other villagers the hunters paraded once round the village before heading for the jungle.

During the ride Old Rem tried as best he could to repeat to his grand-son all he knew about the wickedness and ferocity of wild buffaloes, how to approach them, how to lead one's elephant into the attack without being exposed to the sudden, vicious charges of the beasts at bay.

A lone wild buffalo was grazing on an open space near a *bo cua*[2]. Wild buffaloes as a rule prefer to feed singly. Only when they change grazing grounds do they move in herds, and in that case it is most advisable to give them a wide berth.

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1. The Truong Son Range is dotted with salt hills, which are much frequented by animals

2. A salt hillock, in the Lao language.

To confuse the animal's acute sense of smell Old Pa scooped up a handful of ash from his bag, and threw it up to see the direction of the wind so that he might advance up-wind. Then he put up one hand, making signs for the other hunters to scatter into a half-circle around the prey. The kill was to be made by Dik. The other mahouts' role was to provide him with the necessary assistance.

The wild buffalo suddenly craned its neck. Its entire body became tense.

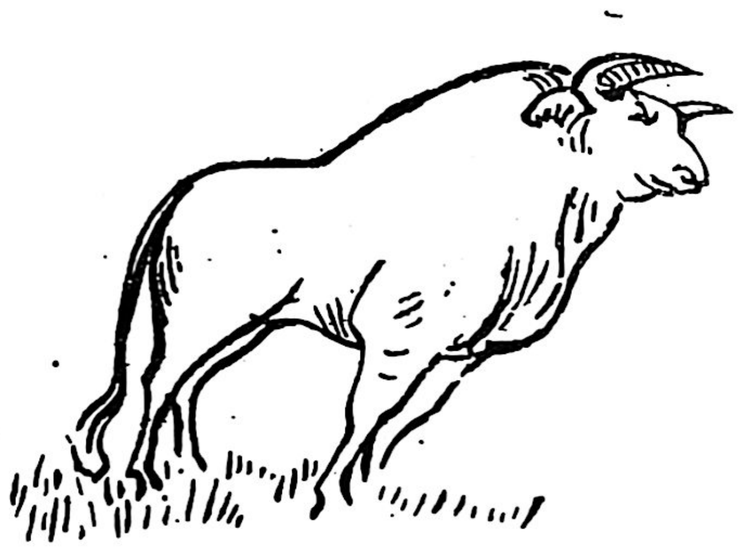
Lomluong slowed down, imitating the elephant ahead.

Dik bent himself forward. His heart was beating the tattoo, audible even to his grand-father.

"Take it easy, son," Old Rem reassured him. "The buffalo can't escape. Just make Lomluong charge in. He will rip open the buffalo's chest as sure as mud."

The buffalo meanwhile had lowered its head. It eyes were hidden by the grass. Then, nervous again, it took several quick steps forward, looking anxiously around. The beast was well built. Its brownish feet, slender but wiry, moved with swiftness. Its tail, which ended in a tuft of black hair, swung rhythmically. Suddenly it darted its head back, its rosy and black speckled nose quivering. The sight of Lomluong sent it into flight. As more elephants came into view, the beast swung back. It attempted a side-ways movement. But, instead of continuing in this direction it stopped again. The elephants were coming closer every

second. The buffalo stamped and snorted angrily, its eyes appearing to dart flames. Lomluong continued to advance, coldly, threateningly. The



buffalo crouched low on its forelegs, in a position favourable either for a sudden charge or a swift escape.

Dik called Lomluong to a halt. The wise boy wanted to be sure of the adversary's intention before the duel began.

The buffalo cut across Lomluong's path. Then it wheeled about and came back charging, head low, horns level, aiming at the rear of the elephant. The situation became critical. Lomluong, the hunter, was becoming the hunted.

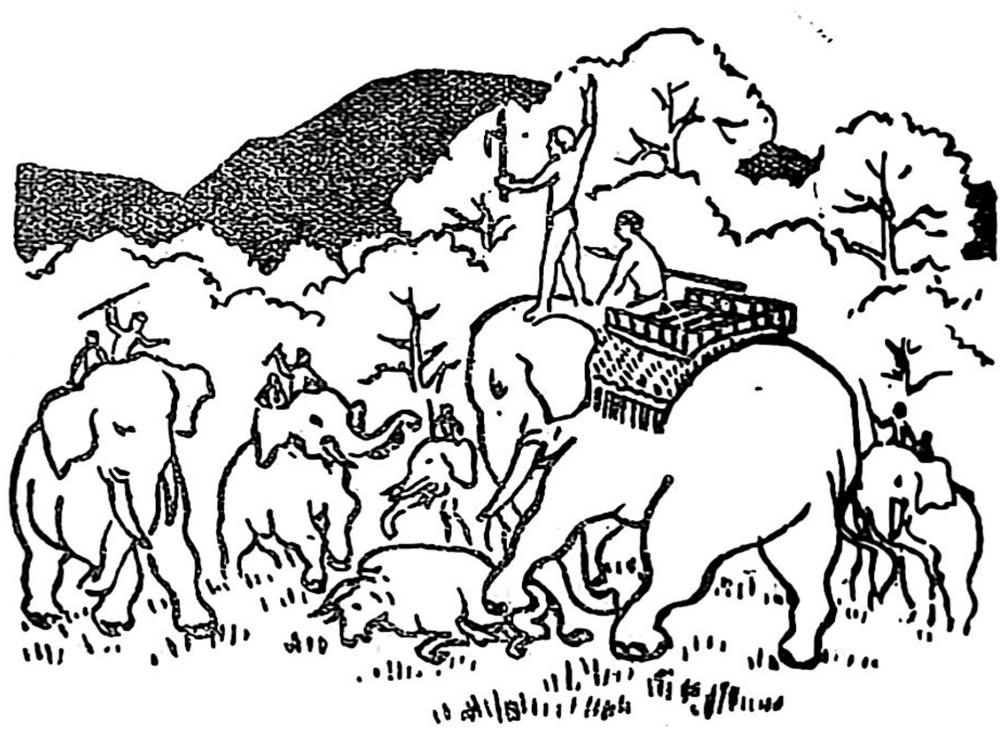
Old Rem shot up, a lance in each hand. But he lost balance and fell back crouched on the animal's back as Lomluong, obeying a curt order from Dik, reversed himself in a rapid turn.

What happened next no one quite knew. Old Rem and the two boys heard a heavy thud. Looking down they saw blood dripping from Lomluong's tusks. At the elephant's feet the buffalo lay thrashing in agony, its chest gaping with two deep tusk wounds.

In an instant the scene was filled with elephants. Old Pa pulled his animal to a halt beside the victorious Lomluong. He instructed Dik to return the lance to Old Rem.

"You are worthy now to be called a mahout, boy!" Old Pa praised him. "And lucky you are, too. Your elephant had a very narrow escape."

Loudly the other mahouts cheered.



Old Pa got up on his feet and signed for silence.

"From now on we recognize Dik as a mahout," he solemnly proclaimed. "On behalf of the Takhan villagers I hand him the lance on this hunting ground. Any oppositions ?"

Everyone agreed with the patriarch's decision. Raising their lances overhead, they gave a united shout in honour of Dick.

Thrilling with joy, Dik drove Lomluong up to Old Pa and received from his own hands the new lance whose polished shaft was made of ironwood and whose steel head sparkled in the sunlight.

Seated behind his grandson, Old Rem gleefully said to himself : "So he's a mahout now, my dear Dik. A fifteen-year-old mahout. He'll be invited to the hunting banquets and the communal meetings just like an elder. A prodigious boy, indeed. At his age I was only an obscure aid."

Old Pa's voice again rang out, deep and resonant :

"Who will you choose as your aid, oh Dik ?"

Although it was in his own right to choose his aid Dik had already consulted his grandpa about that. He turned his head over his shoulder and looked at Old Rem questioningly. Old Rem nodded approval. Dik then sprung up and shouted happily : "I choose Srung, sir !"

The patriach nodded his consent.

"Good, Srung," he said. "From now on you're Dik's aid. Take your place behind him."

Old Rem moved aside to make room for Srung and put his arms around the waist of the amazed boy.

The sun was setting behind the distant peaks as the hunting party left for home. When they reached the village it was already dark, and villagers were waiting with lighted torches. The sight of the lance in Dik's upraised arm and the dead buffalo laid across the hawdah on Lomluong's back touched off a chorus of gongs and drums. The new mahout was given his welcome of honour. People called for him and congratulated his grand-father.

"I'm very pleased," the latter kept saying to everyone. "Now I can die with peace in my heart."

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The midday stillness was savagely shattered by a sudden burst of gongs, drums and horns. The sounds were carried by the wind from village to village. In Takhan, people stopped working and listened with foreboding. Even the elephants showed signs of curiosity. They lifted their trunks and fidgeted, trying to guess what was happening. The tocsin continued, mounted runners were flying about. A great feeling of tension seized hold of every Kha village in the neighbourhood.

A blood-horse was galloping towards Takhan, its hooves striking sparks off the rocky trail. It came to a halt by the watch-tower at the gate of the village, its muzzle white with foam, its mane wet

with sweat. The horse raked the ground with one foreleg to indicate that it needed water while its rider, one hand clutching the jungle knife he carried at his belt, rapidly climbed up the ladder to the top of the tower, where he beat frantically on the huge village gong.

The enemy is coming ! French troops are on the way !

People hurried off to the elephant-clearing the better to hear the bad news. French troops were coming ! They were setting fire to Talak village further down the mountain slopes.

This once quiet remote mountain region had seen too many bad changes lately. French troops, caught with their pants down on another front, had fled to Laos[1]. There had been raids by Japanese troops. In Takhan, villagers had been forced to act as scouts for the enemy, and elephants had been commandeered to transport food and ammunition.

One day, the mahouts had seen Japanese troops run for their lives. The Japanese retreat was followed by the occupation of the district capital by the Viet Minh. Soon afterwards word came that the revolutionaries led by Ho Chi Minh had taken over the whole country.

The village chief ran away, and the people of Takhan were looking forward to the arrival of

1. On 9 March 1945, the Japanese troops in Indochina overthrew the French administration by a *coup de force*. In September 1945, following the Japanese surrender, French staged a comeback.

revolutionary cadres. But before the latter could get to the village French troops had mounted attacks from their hideouts in the Lao jungles.

Upon learning of the bad news Pa, Rem and the other village elders called a meeting at which it was decided that the village would lie low for some time, hoping for the arrival of revolutionary cadres. They were already reported to have reached the villages below and would be coming to Takhan before long. In the meantime the population would fortify or block all approaches to the village and arm themselves.

But the French came the following day. Their aircraft, whose bellies gleamed white in the sun like the bellies of fish, hovered in the sky. They tilted their wings and swooped down suddenly, red balls of fire would erupt from their noses, followed by a series of explosions. The elephants were terrified. They blared frantically and tried to break loose. One house caught fire, then another, and still another. When the aircraft finally soared away half of the village was burning, and many elephants were lying dead on the ground.

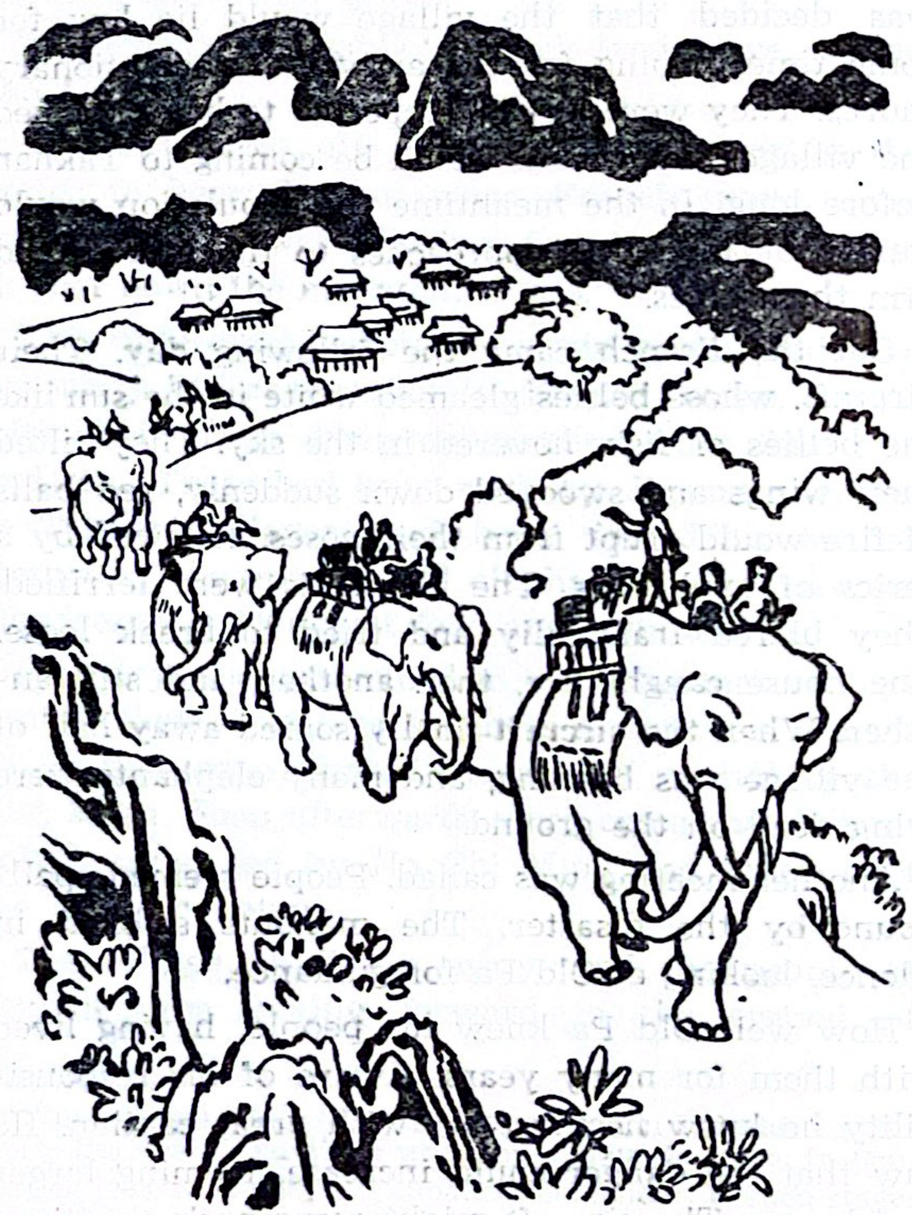
Another meeting was called. People seemed spellbound by the disaster. The mahouts smoked in silence, looking at Old Pa for guidance.

How well Old Pa knew his people, having lived with them for many years. Aware of his responsibility he knew he must act with great caution. He saw that the danger could increase, looming larger and larger. The aircraft might come back any time.

Enemy troops might move up from the foot of the mountain without warning...

He ordered the people to evacuate the village.

Elephants were fetched from the clearing and howdahs buckled on by grim and silent mahouts.



Chicken coops and pigsties became pandemonium as the frightened creatures were rounded up. Conscious of disaster, babies were crying at the top of their voices.

The women were stunned.

"Where do we go ?" they questioned their men with their eyes.

"Out yonder," the men replied vaguely with their lances, which they shook towards the distant peaks.

"Do we have to leave all this behind ?" the women found their voices to protest. "How do we live then ? What shall we find yonder ?"

"We can't stay. That's for sure," the men tried to reason. "The enemy will kill us all and our elephants, too."

Lekdam and Lomluong were drawn up alongside the verandah, their howdahs level with the floor of the house. Old Rem and Dik looked at each other silently and stepped into the house. Then, still in silence, they took stock of the interior.

Grand-father and grand-son were at a loss as to what to take with them. Each thing was closely associated with old memories and seemed so dear to their hearts. Never had it occurred to them that they would have to leave their home and go away.

They fumbled at one thing after another. In the end the old man turned regretfully away from the things they would not need and picked up only the most essential. They had to pack and load the elephants so that they would be able to help short-handed families.

"We shall build a new house," Old Rem comforted his grand-son. "Once we drive the enemy away we shall have everything back again. Safety for ourselves and our elephants is what we need at this moment."

First they loaded the howdahs with salt, rice, blankets and clothes. Next came cooking utensils, knives, spades and hoes, lances, crossbows, quivers, chains and ropes.

Outside gongs and drums were sounding, imperatively urging everybody to hurry up. Old Rem and Dik took a last look at the room, stepped onto the backs of their elephants, and headed for Srung's house and for other families where help was needed.

Old Pa was surveying the formation of the column. The elephants were laden with household goods, food and crying children. They snorted, looking curiously at the houses which were emptying so quickly and at the agitated villagers in the clearing. Contrary to their habits when preparing for a hunt they did not champ at the bit. Neither did they show any unwillingness to take the unusually heavy loads. They seemed to know that something was amiss. The only thing that irritated them were the dogs around their feet. They thrashed their trunks about to chase these pestering animals away.

Old Pa looked around once more, resting his eyes on every house, every tree, every shrub.

"Let's say good-bye to our village," he addressed the people, his voice altered by emotion. "Now, let's go, folks."

"When will we come back ?" someone asked hesitantly.

"Only heaven can tell. But if we can reach safety, we will come back."

The exodus began.

The column started off sadly and slowly. One elephant gave a sad, long bray. It was imitated by the rest of the herd, and the mournful chorus rose and swelled.

Once outside the village, the elephants quickened their pace forcing the people to do likewise. On their backs the children had stopped crying and most of them were sleeping fitfully. The dogs raced ahead or dropped back, their tongues hanging. Occasionally they would hitch up a hind-leg to piss on a tree to mark the trail.

The column stopped for a rest at noon. The male elephants stood in the shade separately. They remained motionless, as if in sleep, their trunks limp. The females were restless. They huddled together in groups of four or five, while their babes crouched in their shadow. They seemed to be more aware of the suffering of their exhausted masters.

In the jungle the refugees were lying or squatting on the ground. Fires had been built for the meal and were crackling and hissing. As noon passed into afternoon the air became heavy. Rattan hammocks were put up between branches, and worried mothers were swinging and crooning their infants to sleep through the steady hum of blood-thirsty mosquitoes.

At this point Old Pa called for a meeting. The mahouts with troubled faces took their places on big stone slabs under a giant tree.

The patriach told them about their planned route and final destination where they would make the new village. The route was familiar. Many had travelled it on previous trips to Laos.

"Too far away," one mahout objected.

"The further, the safer," another argued. "It's much better to finish with the whole business once for all than to keep having to move on."

Old Pa firmly continued. He agreed that the families would have to make a fairly long journey, through a vast expanse of jungle, across Phu Luong Mountain and the hilly range, and then down into a fertile valley. That was where the new village would be set up. What occupied his thoughts most was a trail running past the site of the new village and into Laos. Should the road to the market be blocked, they could cross the border for salt, textiles and hardware.

The plan was adopted without further opposition. The journey would be very hard on the women and the children, but to reach safety they must go far. the farther the better.

They hit the trail once more. Late in the afternoon they lost their bearings. No one could remember the way. Monsoon floods had created new openings in the jungle while old ones had been overgrown. The refugees therefore could only head directly for where the sun was setting.

The undergrowth was practically impenetrable, and low-hanging branches and thorny vines made the passage even worse. The strongest elephants, among them Lomluong, were sent ahead to crash a trail. Forcing their way through they pulled down vines and branches, uprooted small trees and trampled down undergrowth which was then removed by other elephants. In their wake the refugees trudged on, not without having their clothes and limbs torn. When the column stopped for the night people were too tired to care any more. They threw themselves on the ground, completely exhausted. The few who were still fit gathered wood and built several bonfires to keep wild beasts away. They stationed the elephants in a wide circle around the camp for protection.

Day after day the refugees went on following in the wake of the patient elephants. One day Lomluong, who was in the lead, came to a standstill and sniffed suspiciously. There was nothing Dik and Srung could do to make him move. The other elephants also stopped, bringing the entire column to a halt.

Old Pa had to take the lead now, and the journey continued. A moment later a strong and unpleasant smell was wafted up. No one could tell where it came from until they reached a clearing.

The sight was a horrible one. A few leaf-thatched huts lay huddled together at the foot of a gnarled tree, and in one of them lay a shroudless corpse.

"It's the Dead Leaves country," Old Rem exclaimed. "We've strayed into the land of the Dead Leaves tribe."

"The Dead Leaves tribe," the fearful words were whispered down the column.

People shivered. This tribe was but too well known. Kha mahouts on their journeys along the Truong Son Range had often seen Dead Leaves huts on deserted hillsides. The life of the "Dead Leaves" was most primitive. For fire they struck stones one against another, and palm fronds were the only thing they had to clothe themselves. They lived on fruit and roots, and were constantly on the move leaving each place as food became scarce. They made temporary dwellings with branches and fresh leaves which would have dried up by the time they went to another place. Hence the name "Dead Leaves." Like wild animals they avoided company. The dead would be left to rot in the huts while the living moved on in haste.

Old Pa alighted and came to stand by the corpse, followed by Old Rem and the other mahouts. Pensively they remained there for some time and then set fire to the huts.

The refugees were on the road again, their hearts heavy. Behind them black smoke was billowing up, and the air was thick with the bitter smell of burning flesh.

The atmosphere was heavy with foreboding. The women drew their babies closer and besought their

men with their eyes. "Where shall we go?" the unspoken question was put again.

"We'll all end up like the Dead Leaves," they seemed to be thinking as the question remained unanswered.

One woman raced up to the elephant at the head of the column. "Oh Pa," she screamed, raising her arms as if she was trying to hold the elephant back. "Where are we going?"

"Be comforted, people," Old Pa answered. Pointing his lance ahead he continued, "The next turn will bring us to the site of our new village. We can't stop here. That would be the end of us. Now look! Isn't that Phu Luong mountain?"

They all looked up at the great mountain looming in the distance. Not many knew its name or its significance in their journey, but Old Pa's words put everybody in good heart again. They knew that they could not be lost for ever in this dark jungle, that having age and wisdom for their guidance sooner or later they would reach the new land.

"Just give me your trust," Old Pa said again, his voice ringing with confidence. "I will bring you to safety."

"Let us go," the mahouts cheered, waving their lances. "Wherever he leads we'll go."

The column rumbled into motion again with people clinging to one another, dogs racing up and down, whining excitedly. The elephants resumed their laborious progress. They proceeded stubbornly as though they too were aware that a better place

was before them if only they could follow the will of their masters.

The refugees continued on a southwesterly course. The promised land began to take shape in their minds.

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Time passed. Now the village of May[1] Takhan had brought in its first crop, and life was gradually returning to normal. The temporary huts of the early days had been replaced by impressive houses built on pillars too big for the span of a man's arms. The village was well covered by the trees' canopy, and an elephant park had been set up at a clearing within easy reach and yet out of the way of strangers. Close by was a fenced-in garden in which medicinal plants were thriving. Beyond all this, flourishing ricefields and new banana groves stretched as far as the eye could see. The entire prosperous village, however, was almost invisible from the air.

The villagers were happy. The land was good and their first crop was abundant. The mahouts were particularly pleased as fresh water and food were plentiful for them to fatten their elephants. Even the women set aside their longing for the old home, and were doing their best to help in the new prosperity their men had begun to build.

1. New.

Old Rem had built for his grand-son and himself a new house, somewhat smaller but much more solid and more beautiful than the old one. Dik and Srung meanwhile had grown to manhood and were performing their duties together with the other males of the community : keeping watch, grooming elephants, helping short-handed families, exploring for new hunting grounds, gathering herbs, looking for new sources of food, and so on.

The war seemed to have stopped short at the big villages in the lower hills, from which artillery fire could still be heard faintly at night. But in New Takhan, apart from the few times it had been overflown by enemy aircraft, peace was complete. Even so people were still on the look-out. Emergency plans had been worked out with nearby villages, and sentries were posted at all approaches to the village.

One day Dik and Srung put their hands on an intruder. This was a skinny, anaemic looking youth wearing a tired slouched hat and a tattered, dirty grey uniform full of pockets. A rifle was slung across his shoulder. They first noticed him as he had just forded the river and was about to set foot on the farthest of the terraced fields. The intruder, or whatever he was, was dragging a foot. When he caught sight of the houses among the trees he stopped short and disappeared into the bush. When it was dark he left his hiding place and cautiously picked his way into the village. At a turn of the road he suddenly found himself in the strong grip of an elephant's trunk.

Dik hurled him to the ground and disarmed him while Srung sounded his horn.

Other villagers rushed up. The intruder was trussed up and marched to the elephant park. Searching him they found a cartridge-box, two hand grenades which they mistook for inoffensive pieces of ironware, a piece of paper with a red seal on it, a snapshot of an old man, and a metal plaque painted in blue, white and red.

It was assumed that the youth was a spy working for the French. The coloured metal plaque, to the mahouts, was a convincing piece of evidence. Moreover they had seen garrison troops in the old days wear the same kind of uniform made of the same material. What intrigued them, however, was the perfect calmness of the man. He showed no sign of fear though he was so weak that a woman could have easily overpowered him. He did not ask for mercy. He could hardly stand on his feet because of a festering wound on his left leg.

The guards showed Old Pa the things they had found on the prisoner and told him of their suspicion, and while the village elders went into consultation at the communal house the prisoner was left tied to an elephant stake in the park.

More villagers began coming to the park. They stared at the prisoner with unveiled hostility. They only went home when it was quite late, leaving one mahout on watch with his elephant. One by one the torches went out. In the night the park was almost deserted except for the great black bulk of the elephant, the dull gleam of a lance, and the

glow of a cigar between the lips of the watching mahout. From time to time the prisoner took a deep breath as if to reassure himself.

The stillness was broken by voices coming from one house where a fire was still burning. The voices increased as they came nearer. Torches were lighted now, and the prisoner could see a group of young men armed with lances, which gleamed ominously in the flickering light. In the middle of the group was an old man whose hair and brows were completely white. The rear was brought up by women and children.

The old man came to a halt within a few feet of the prisoner. Then he turned to his followers.

"Let those who have no business here go home," he said. "I don't want you to be unnecessarily shocked by the sight of blood."

Women and children drew back. But instead of going away they dispersed among the trees. They wanted to see the execution.

The prisoner knew he was going to die. He resigned himself to his fate, and looked calmly into the old man's eyes. Still he wondered why he should be killed and why such an apparently respectable patriach should wish his death.

The patriach, none other than Old Pa himself, grimly stared back at the prisoner. "We hold no grudges against you," he said. "So why did you come here with intent to bring death to us? Now that you're going to die, do you wish to say anything?"

"I want to clear up something," the prisoner replied, carefully studying each of the guards in front of him. "First of all I want to know why you people should wish me dead," the question was addressed not only to Old Pa but to all present. "What wrong have I done to you ? Did I violate your taboo

in any way ? No ? I did not spring any of your traps. I avoided all prohibited trails. I did not soil the huts of sick people. So why kill me ? Or are you working for the French. Do you want to trade my ears for salt from the enemy ?"

"You're lying !" snapped Old Pa. "Your words are fine, but we are not so naive as to believe them."

Then he motioned to the guards. "Ready, men ?" he ordered.

The guards closed in slowly but inexorably.

"A moment," the prisoner exploded angrily as he saw that all the lances were directed at his chest. "I'll die if die I must. But first I want to know if you really side with the French."

"Why do you want to know ?" Old Pa was exasperated.

"Because if you do, you'll have cause to regret this all your life. You are helping your own enemy. I can tell you the French are worse than tigers in the jungle. They only want to devour our people. Don't trust them. Go to our own army and join it in defending our country. That is the only way to save yourselves."

"I am not a man to be frightened by death," he continued after a pause. His voice was proudly indignant and at the same time earnestly appealing. "But if you kill me for your French friends' sake the blame will rest with you and your children."

"Liar !" Old Pa was outraged. "We hate the guts of the French. And because you are working for

them we must kill you. You French blood-hound, you're going to die!" The lance in his hand was shaking.

The prisoner seemed to be relieved. "All right. If you don't believe me you may kill me now. I can die in peace knowing that you are not with the enemy. I only want you to keep this piece of paper and give it to our troops when they come."

"Wait!" Old Pa put up a hand. The guards lowered their lances.

"Where did you get that French uniform?" he questioned.

"From a French soldier I killed."

"Where did you come from?"

"Laos." The prisoner nodded his head in the direction of the Truong Son Range. "I'm a volunteer." And he explained what a volunteer was.

"And this? What is it?" Old Pa flung the tricoloured metal plaque on the ground.

"It's the insignia of the Lao Itsala[1]: Like our army, the Lao Itsala is fighting against the French."

"Why does it have the same colours as the French flag?"

"You're mistaken, Elder. The French flag has vertical bars. The bars on that insignia are horizontal, with a white moon in the middle. These are the colours of free Laos."

"And whose picture is this?" Old Pa's voice was more conciliatory now. He held up the snapshot to

1. The Lao Free Front.

the young man, whom everybody by this time was beginning to respect as a revolutionary combatant.

"How come you don't know him yet?" the young man was genuinely surprised. "He's Ho Chi Minh! Uncle Ho, as we call him."

"Uncle Ho!" They had heard about him all right. People had talked a great deal about the man who had roamed oceans and continents in quest of a way to save his country and his people.

"Uncle Ho! How wonderful!" the villagers were thrilled.

Old Pa held the picture close to his eyes for a better view, and people clustered around him with their torches.

"Let me see! Let me have a look!"

"Is that Uncle Ho?"

"We must have a look at Uncle Ho!"

The picture was passed from hand to hand, and people marvelled at the benevolent look of the man, his bright eyes, the fine hair of his beard. They forgot all about the prisoner.

"Oh, the armyman," Old Pa exclaimed apologetically when he finally recalled the existence of the prisoner.

"Untie him! Quick!"

"Forgive us, son," he said gruffly. "We were blinded with hatred for the French."

The young man was too weak to reply. His eyes swam and his strength was flagging. He collapsed in the muscular arms that were untying his bonds.

When he came to he found himself laid on a sweet smelling mattress of dry grass in a homely room. The first people he saw were the two lads who had sprung the ambush on him.

"We're very sorry for roughing you up," they said shamefacedly.

"There's nothing to be sorry about. You did it really well. What are your names, comrades ?"

"Comrades ? What does that mean ?"

"That means people working for the same cause. We all hate the French and want to save our country, don't we ? So we're comrades."

Dik and Srung introduced themselves. "And you... comrade, What's your name ?"

"Lien Lac[1]. My name is Lien Lac," the stranger answered with a good-natured laugh.

Within minutes he became known throughout the village as Lien Lac, people flocked to see him with generous gifts — rice alcohol, honey, bear gall, tiger-bone jelly, and fruit of all kinds.

Lien Lac was recovering fast. Old Rem's house, where he was staying, was packed every night with an audience eager to hear him talk about the country, about Uncle Ho and the revolutionary army. His greatest admirers were Dik and Srung. They stuck to him and listened rapturously to his captivating stories.

One night Lien Lac decided that it was time to form a guerrilla group. He knew now that though the villagers hated the French they also feared them

1. A liaison agent.

and that they would abandon their houses rather than stay and face the enemy. But he knew that to run away was not the best policy. They should be persuaded to hold their ground and fight back.

"What would you do if the French came here ?" he asked them.

"We would go to another place and build another village."

"And if they attacked the new village ?"

"We would move on again to be out of their reach."

"That won't do, " Lien Lac shook his head. "The enemy also have legs, haven't they ? Where you go they can go. And the moment will come when you just have nowhere left to go."

"There's no problem at all, young man," one village elder declared with confidence. "Our land is vast, our rivers are long. There's plenty of room for us to move about."

"You can't roam the country for ever," Lien Lac reasoned, his eyes searching the old man's. "In the end you will have neither time nor strength left to work your fields. No. That won't do. You must stick to this place."

His audience was perplexed.

"Do you have enough courage to fight the French ?" he asked.

"It's not a question of courage," said Old Pa after a while. "The point is they have guns. They can even travel through the air. How can we cope with them ?"

"You just keep yourselves under cover. Lie in ambush for them. Then you can see them without being seen. You can kill them with just your crossbows, and you can take their guns for your own use !"

"That's the way to deal with them," Lien Lac added, getting up on his feet. "We are going to form a guerrilla group. The women and children will go into hiding in case of trouble, but we men will stay and fight."

"You're right, son," said Old Pa eagerly. "We must train ourselves to protect our village. We don't have to run away any more."

The next day Old Pa brought a group of village lads to Lien Lac.

"He's a son of Uncle Ho," he solemnly told them "He will show you how to fight the enemy. You must obey him."

Lien Lac rose up from his bed, fetched his rifle and grenades and, limping painfully, led the group to the elephant park.

That was how the Takhan guerrilla group came into being. It consisted of Dik and Srung and some twenty other enthusiastic lads.

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Lien Lac was brutally roused from sleep by a loud explosion, which was followed by another and still another. The concussions, bouncing back and

forth between the rocky slopes further down the mountain range, shattered the stillness of the jungle.

Soon guerrillas were hurriedly taking up positions. To the insistent tocsin sounded by gongs, drums and horns, women and children ran for cover in small huts scattered far and wide in the thickets of the jungle. Lien Lac, supporting himself on Old Rem's arm, tottered to the head of the ladder and eased himself onto the howdah on Lomluong's back.

The houses were emptied in a moment. The village, with its gate shut, its paths deserted but bristling with traps and automatic catapults, was as silent as a tomb.

Perched behind big rocks overlooking the only trail leading into the village the guerrillas waited for the enemy, their crossbows at the ready, their quivers full of poisoned arrows.

Below could be seen the uniform greenness of the jungle, marred here and there by billowing columns of smoke. The big booms made by mortar rounds continued to be repeated for a long time, hurled from one rock to another. Then long bursts of machinegun fire were heard, punctuated by the pop pop of rifle fire.

"That's our troops." Lien Lac cheerfully announced. "They've gone into action."

The information was transmitted down the whole line, and everybody was pleased.

"Listen to the long bursts. They are the French firing," Lien Lac explained. "Our men have to economize on ammunition, so they fire shot by shot."

The guerrillas now saw the difference between "our fire" and "their fire." What they had often heard about back in the old village and in the war stories told them by Lien Lac and were longing to see, was "our men".

"Our men" turned up at last, late in the afternoon. They came up the slope, moving nimbly like real mountaineers. Clad in green, each man carried, in addition to his rifle and ammunition, his personal ration of rice and water --- the rice in a long bag tied round the waist, the water in a length of bamboo slung across a shoulder. The rear of the group was formed by bearers of stretchers and cooking utensils.

"Our troops are coming!" Lien Lac broke the news excitedly. He clambered out of his position, emitted several long hoots to attract the attention of the group and ordered his men to dismantle all the traps in the village.

The hoots put the advancing men on the alert. They unslung their rifles and darted into the jungle where they vanished among the trees. Only three of them remained on the road and continued to advance, now with great caution.

Lien Lac went down to meet them, supporting himself on a stick, flanked by Dik and Srung, and followed by some of the other guerrilllas.

A short distance from the advanced party coming up the slope Lien Lac hailed again. The newcomers hurried up but seeing his French uniform and the crossbows in the hands of his followers, they stopped short.

"You are welcome here," Lien Lac said. "What unit?"

"Truong Son unit. Who are you?"

"I'm the regional liaison agent," Lien Lac replied. "I want to see Comrade Thang."

Then, turning to his group, he cheerfully announced, "They're our men."

From nowhere guerrillas suddenly appeared and surrounded the armymen. Thang, the Company Commander, was coming up. He gazed incredulously at Lien Lac for a moment then flung his arms round

the young man. "Duc! Fancy meeting you here. What are you doing here?"

"I was coming back from Laos when I was wounded. I almost kicked the bucket here. And these are our guerrillas from Takhan village. What do you think of them?"

The village came to life again.

News was that the army had won a big victory. The French, led by a traitor, were trying to take Takhan by a pincer movement when they ran into the Truong Son men. Heavily beaten they had to flee, leaving on the scene many dead and a lot of weapons.

It was the first time the people of Takhan had seen revolutionary soldiers in the flesh. So brave and so simple, young men, just like Lien Lac in every way. The kids formed compact rings around them, awed by the guns. A few made bold to touch these outlandish weapons and to ask about the combat in the morning.

Old Pa now busied himself arranging for accomodation, setting up a sick-bay for the wounded, and instructing the women to prepare plenty of chicken soup for the guests. Then, together with the other elders he planned a celebration party to be given the following day in token of gratitude to the armymen.

People set about making preparations immediately, intent upon making the occasion a memorable one, much more memorable than even the annual mahouts' festivals.

The elephant park was a hive of activity early the next morning. Half of the lads, led by Dik and Srung, were coming back from a hunt started the previous night. Their game, laid across the backs of the elephants, included a wild buffalo, two large bears, and half a dozen wild boar and deer.

Soon large bamboo trays laden with meat were laid out, and a dozen big fires were roaring. Alcohol of the best vintage, which had been left to ferment in big jars buried deep in the ground, was fetched. The feast was to last the whole day, so food and drink must be laid out in plenty.

Old Pa was busy all over the place. His main concern was that the guests be splendidly and sumptuously feasted. Everything was ready by the time the rising sun was well above the eastern peaks. The ground was covered with the multicoloured rugs with which the elephants were adorned on festive occasions and on which food was now laid out sufficiently for groups of six. There were four courses — steamed glutinous rice, roast meat, bamboo-shoot stew, and mushroom stew. As for alcohol, it was contained in big jars, each fitted with six bamboo pipes decorated with multicoloured threads. For seats, six blocks of wood the height of a handbreadth were placed around each rug.

Old Pa and Old Rem made a last round of the park to see if everything was in order: the former systematically checking every jar and tray, ordering replenishment here and there; the latter sniffing at the rugs to see that they didn't smell too much of elephants.

"I'm not quite satisfied," Old Pa said. "We don't have covers for the seats, and some of the stewed dishes are wanting. Had we been in the old place we could have presented our guests with something much better."

To the armymen, the feast, however, was beyond all expectations. They were seated in groups of three, each group to keep company with three of the villagers.

After all the seats had been filled, a group of beautifully dressed girls came up with fragrant flowers arranged in rattan baskets. Each person was invited, according to a time-honoured custom, to select one flower and stick it behind the ear for luck.

The banquet began. Everybody was happy and was plying everybody else with choice morsels and plenty to drink. Lien Lac and the officers were honoured with the company of the village elders. And only then was it explained to the villagers that Lien Lac was not his real name at all. Laughter was general.

At a moment during the feast Old Pa was informed by Thang, the Company Commander, that the troops would be hitting the road the next day. He did not like the idea at all, but seeing that it was futile to resist military decisions, he slowly rose up and proposed the toast.

"May our brothers — children of Uncle Ho — be always safe and sound!" he said solemnly. "May victory attend them! May peace reign in our country again!"

The armymen stood up and cheered.

"May our brothers enjoy the best of health and never catch cold or have so much as a runny nose," Dik and Srung broke in. "May they be as strong as elephants, as quick as leopards, as tough as iron shields!"

Old Rem nodded appreciatively. When the soldiers replied with cheers he imitated them by noisily clapping his hands.

Again people bent the bamboo pipes to their lips and drank long draughts of the delicious wine. They drank and ate till nightfall. Then it was time for amusement. The place was cleared for a big bonfire built with huge logs.

In the light of the roaring, leaping flames the night began with an elephant parade. The animals, gaily adorned with rugs and howdahs, entered the circle in single file, flourishing their tusks like so many naked swords. The mahouts and their aids, magnificent with their muscular torsos, naked but for a black or grey striped loin-cloth, beat their lances on the howdahs to keep time. Then, at an order given simultaneously by all the mahouts the elephants turned and faced the guests, went down on their knees and rose up again with one accord.

Then came a hunter's song sung in chorus by the village girls, who wore close-fitting sleeveless blouses and elaborately embroidered skirts held in place by braided silver belts. The singers chanted melodiously to the accompaniment of the gong, while the lads, wreathed in fresh leaves and playing the part of hunters, pranced around them in a blur of whirling dances, shrieking with exultation.

Old Rem also made his contribution: a ballad sung to the long drum. Smiling broadly he took his place near the fire tapping lightly so that the drum went boom boom... boom boom... Gradually he increased the tempo until the drum seemed to take life under his flying hands. Dik and Srung, intoxicated by the urgent call, left their places among the spectators, went to Old Rem, and sat down at his feet. They

removed their knives from their backs, put these on their knees, and drummed their fingers on the scabbards. Other lads, meanwhile, had joined them. Old Rem's drum was now leading a whole band of tambourins, flutes, vertical two-string violins, leaf harmonicas, and console guitars in a grand overture to the jungle ballad.

"A herd of elephants once dwelt on Mount Phu Luong. They lived peacefully and in abundance in an unexplored jungle. One year the jungle was invaded by carnivorous beasts coming from the outside in great numbers. The alien beasts exacted from the elephants three calves a day for fresh meat... three calves a day for fresh meat..."

Old Rem pranced round the fire, tapping away at his drum. For better effect he stooped and glared at the audience.

"The leading elephants laid heads together and made an appeal to all females with calves at their feet, all males proud of their tusks, and all warriors of the herd. 'Listen', they said, 'We must decide on a course of action: to continue to pay ransom to the enemy, to run away to an uncertain life, or to unite and fight back.'

"' We will not live in shame,' the warriors cried.

"' No children of the jungle will live in shame,'

"' Unite and fight back »'

"' We'll die for the land of our ancestors !' "

The drum became more and more imperative as Old Rem sang the song of the war elephants. At the part of the story where the elephants marched on their enemy Dik and Srung got up and sneaked off.

Since they came to know one another Dik, Srung and Lien Lac had been inseparable. The village boys had put all sorts of questions to their new friend, about his family, about Uncle Ho, about the war. They had learned many new things, and had been dreaming of the day when, like Lien Lac they could be on their own and out in the world.

One night Dik had told his grand-father of his secret longing. The old man had looked stunned: he had never suspected that his grand-son might want to leave him. As far as he was concerned, Dik, like Srung, was still a mere child who needed his protection.

"There are only the two of us now," he had said sadly. "I will miss you terribly, you know. But I will not try to detain you either. Young people today must join the fight. Only it's a pity that I'm too old to go. So you must go in my stead." While this conversation was going on, Lomluong below was breathing regularly. From time to time, it lashed its trunk about to chase mosquitoes away, causing the chain to rattle loudly.

"Take Lomluong with you," Old Rem had continued, apparently reassured by the presence of the young elephant. "He will work for the army and will be a friend for you. His company will remind you of home. But remember to bring him back to me when the war is over."

So Old Rem had decided to seek Captain Thang's approval for Dik and also for Srung to go, the latter having also asked him to intervene on his behalf.

... Now Dik and Srung were waiting anxiously for a decision. They put Lomluong's ceremonial rug on his back and walked the elephant back to the park, where Old Rem was coming to the end of his narrative — the triumphal march of the elephants.

The band had hardly finished the gong-dominated finale when Old Pa stood up and motioned for Dik and Srung to bring in their elephant.

"As you are going tomorrow," he announced, addressing Captain Thang and his troops, "We have prepared a special gift to you: this elephant. It will spare you a lot of heavy work."

The Company Commander shot up, wide-eyed. Elephants were the principal means of living in this village and the most valuable part of the people's property. He politely but firmly refused the gift, and looked at his men for support.

"You can't refuse us," Old Rem went to the support of the senior elder. "We have two elephants. This one belongs to my children and they insist on presenting it to you. Isn't that your wish, boys?" He winked meaningly at Dik and Srung. The youths nodded vigourously.

"You can't refuse our gift without hurting our feelings," Old Rem declared with finality. His statement was greeted by a volley from the gongs and drums and loud cheers from the villagers.

Thang reluctantly stood up to receive a coil of rope taken off the elephant by Old Rem, in token of the transfer of ownership.

"You also need someone to look after the elephant, don't you ?" Old Rem added. to the great embarrassment of the hopeful Dik and Srung.

"The elephant needs its own keeper. It won't accept a total stranger," he went on significantly.

Then, turning to Dik and Srung, he made the introduction : This lad here is the keeper, and here is his aid. We entrust them to you. They will take care of Lomluong."

And he added, squinting cunningly, "As you have accepted our elephant, don't say that you don't want our boys."

Dik and Srung looked hopeful when Thang smiled at them. But their hope was short-lived. The Company Commander said he could not settle such an important matter by himself, that he must consult his staff. Then, to his hosts and hostesses, he said, "We cannot thank you too much. Here for you are a few rifles we just seized from the French..."

The enthusiastic guerrillas did not let him finish. They broke into wild cheers, accompanied by the thunderous gongs and drums. It was such an unexpected gift. Guns were what they needed most now to defend themselves.

The armymen brought in three rifles, an ammunition case, and ten grenades.

"It's our hope that these will help you get more weapons from the French and make them pay dearly if they insist upon intruding into your village."

This was a solemn moment. The guerillas, upon receiving the much coveted weapons, held them up for the other villagers to admire.

That very night Dik was formally told he was to be allowed to join the company. Srung could not go, the Captain decided. Old Rem would have nobody to turn to, and Srung, though not a blood relative, had lived with the old man so long that he had become indispensable. Besides, there was Lekdam, the ageing elephant, to take care of.

So the three — the old man and the two lads — left the party for home to prepare for the departure of Dik and Duc, the liaison agent.

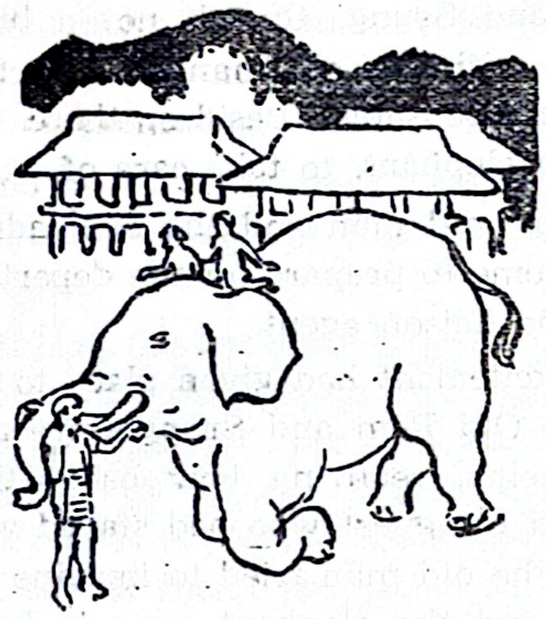
In Dik's heart excitement had given place to the sadness of parting. Old Rem and Srung were also on the verge of tears, realizing how badly they would miss Dik and the guest who had stayed with them for so long. The old man tried to imagine the life his grand-son and the elephant were to begin very soon, the life of a soldier which, he was sure, would be hard and exacting.

The packing done, the trio sat silently by the fire. All was quiet in the house. Distant songs and the rhythm of drums at the park could still be heard faintly.

Lomluong did not go to his stable under the floor that night. He was kept at the park to be ready for the journey in the morning.

Dik did not go to bed until the party at the park was over. He dozed off with his arms around the

bundle of clothes wrapped in the *phaphe*[1], the same that had been worn by his grand-father on festive occasions or hunting trips. Old Rem stood looking on, leaning on the wall, as if he was trying to engrave in his mind the likeness of his dear grand-son.



When the old man left the house for the park to say good-bye to Lomluong, it was almost dawn, and Srung was already there by the side of the elephant.

He told the animal to kneel down and, putting his hands on the huge head, he said, "You will do for the armymen what you have done for us, Lomluong. Your services will be appreciated. And don't forget to drop in with Dik any time you pass by the village."

The elephant seemed to know how his master was feeling. He let out a soft bleat, and lovingly wrapped its trunk round his old master's neck.

1. A length of cloth for wrapping the body.

Lomluong, laden with weapons, jogged jauntily along beside the armymen. His riders were Dik and Srung. The latter had got permission to accompany his friend and their elephant for a few days.

The jungle resounded with martial songs. The elephant, pricking its ears and swaying its head, listened with obvious pleasure.

Trained for long-distance hunts he was thrilled by the new freedom. Every now and then he flipped his trunk backward to sniff at the young masters, unaware of their contradictory feelings. Srung was sulking for not being allowed to join up together with Dik. The meeting with the armymen had filled him with wanderlust, like the elephants' craving for long journeys. He felt bored by the uneventful life of the village. So he kept his eyes glued to the road ahead, dreaming of far-off places.

Dik, on the contrary, kept looking backward, in the direction of the village now lost beyond the jagged mountains, thinking of his grand-father, of home. The joy of adventure was diluted with a new feeling of unfamiliarity. Oblivious of Srung by his side and the fine scenery he turned his thoughts to Old Rem, Lekdam, and his home. "What are you doing at this moment, Granddad?" he would form the question in his mind with a sigh. "Are you waiting for me, or are you taking Lekdam out?"

After two days they arrived at White Stone River. On the other side was the Cloud Pass and, beyond that, the rolling grass hills infested with tigers. It would be unsafe for Srung to come along any further and then to return alone.

"Go back now, Srung," Dik said. "Take care of Granddad and Lekdam."

"Yes, I'll do that," Srung replied heavily. "I'll keep Granddad company at nights."

"Remember how you saved him from Lomluong the day we got our elephant? So love him as I love him. He must be very lonely now."

"Don't worry. You know that I always love him."

Srung looked up to the mountain pass, where tree-tops were dappled with fleecy white clouds. It was so high. What was there beyond, he wondered. Hills, Meadows? Or just mountains again? He only knew that wherever his friend was going, it must be very, very far, and his heart yearned for Dik.

"You go so far, Dik. Let us hear from you often. Don't forget our village."

"No, I won't forget the village. I will never forget you and my people."

After Srung had gone, Lomluong bellowed after him for a long time. Its loud laments echoed far and wide. It waited and waited, but Srung never came back. It became moody. It balked and shied, and would not eat or drink. It went forward only very reluctantly, after much prodding by Dik, and only several days later did he become normal again.

Then began many more long days of trudging on endless jungle trails with Dik on its neck and heavy loads on its back.

* * *

Meanwhile the enemy was looking high and low ordered full camouflage for Lomluong. Dik, who still kept every trail on the Truong Son Range under constant surveillance. To prepare for the passage across the exposed hill country the Commander ordered full camouflage for Lomluong. Dik, who still remembered how these aircraft could be dangerous, wove a large net with which to cover Lomluong. On this he stuck big leafy branches. The effect was satisfactory: the elephant, from afar, looked like a huge perambulating bush. But the leaves withered quickly under the combined effect of a scorching sun and dry, hot southwesterly wind. After a few hours the moving bush became a heap of straggly twigs and the huge form of the elephant underneath was clearly visible to the naked eye.

One late afternoon, a metallic gleam on a grey mass moving slowly on an open trail caught the attention of a B.26[1]. That gleam was from the guns stacked on the howdah on Lomluong's back. The bomber swooped down an loosed a burst of cannon fire. The exploratory shots hit the ground in a quick succession of explosions and a confusion of smoke and splintered rock. The elephant, mad with panic, swerved and rushed straight back into the jungle together with Dik and the load of arms. The plane returned flying very low, its engines screeching. But the elephant was now nowhere to be seen.

1. A type of bombers supplied to the French army by the United States in the First Indochina War.

Dik returned with the elephant only in the dead of night. His clothes were in shreds, his body covered with scratches. One ammunition case was missing. The journey had to be halted and a detachment sent out with torches in search of the missing case.

The incident gave rise to a hot debate: Whether to return Lomluong to the village, or to break him to gunfire.

The Commander and the Political Instructor sent for Dik.

"We are going to see big battles, you know," the Commander said. "What shall we do to get your Lomluong used to gunfire?"

Dik could not come up with a ready answer. He was always careful of what he said.

"Suppose we put the chain on Lomluong and open fire close to him?" he said after a while. "He might then get used to big noises."

"Courage can become a habit, that I agree." the Commander nodded. "I also know that it takes time to form a habit. But your proposal is impractical. I'm afraid. We cannot afford to waste ammunition."

"Could you think of another way?" the Political Instructor intervened tactfully.

Dik was an experienced mahout. He knew almost everything there was to know about elephants. But this problem really beat him for a minute.

"Could we use fire-crackers instead?" he ventured at last timidly.

"That's a good idea," the Commander said encouragingly. But how to make fire-crackers? Do you know?"

"Yes, I do," Dik admitted cheerfully.

"Go ahead, then, Comrade," the Commander ordered. "What we need is a combat-seasoned elephant, a regular war elephant."

Much time went into the preparations. Once, as they were passing a grove of Indian lilac, Dik fetched a hefty faggot of the wood and lugged it onto the howdah. Another time, coming upon a cave, he went into it and collected a basketful of bat droppings.

He spent whole nights making powder with Indian lilac, charcoal and saltpetre extracted from bat droppings.

In the old days of peace it had been the custom to hold a fireworks contest in the village every year in which almost all the families took part. It had been specially spectacular in the years of bumper crops or when hunting was good. Dik had been initiated into the art when he was a small child, and efforts by him and his grand-father had always won prizes. Now he went at it with great zeal, and his ardour won him the co-operation of the soldiers, who regarded the whole thing as an interesting experiment. At last the fire-crackers — a whole battery of them — were ready, and the education of Lomluong began.

Dik prepared for Lomluong a large pot of maize porridge and two armfuls of sugar cane. He knew

the elephant would be scared out of its wits. But that had to be changed. A war elephant must get used to war. Lomluong's feet were then solidly attached to four strong stakes driven deep into the ground. The elephant darted its eyes about, looking doubtfully at the people who were surrounding it with blazing torches.

When the first big-size fire-cracker went off Lomluong was terrified. He tried desperately to break loose. As more noises followed — deafening explosions accompanied by blinding flashes which shattered the night and made the world spin — the elephant panicked.

When quiet returned Dik unchained Lomluong and led it to the porridge. The elephant was too dazed to eat. It could only stare and stare at its master with glassy eyes.

This routine was repeated for several nights. In the end Lomluong was completely broken in. Through all the din of the fire-crackers it could hear every order and execute it promptly, kneeling down, getting up, turning right or left. After each session it ate up everything that was given as reward.

The next lessons in the elephant's education were arranged by the experienced soldiers. Lomluong was taught to come to the aid of the wounded, to hide itself during an air raid or a ground combat. This training was very difficult, but thanks to Dik's patience, Lomluong could do in the end whatever was demanded of it. To the shout "Hua Bin"!

1. Aircraft !

Lomluong would quickly make for the nearest trees and lie down as still as a rock, waiting for Dik to cover him with a camouflage spread cut from a parachute. He also learnt how to bring assistance to a wounded soldier, using his trunk as a support for the man to lean on, or simply lifting him off the ground and carrying him to a safe place. The soldiers also set up straw dummies for Lomluong's goring practice. "The French ! Give it them !" they urged, and the elephant would lunge forward and stab the targets into shreds with its great tusks.

After this graduation Lomluong was recognized as a regular war elephant and a full member of the unit. To the soldiers the elephant was a real companion-in-arms. They gave it titbits and marvelled at its feats. They pestered Dik with requests for a ride on its back, and in the hot afternoons, trooped along behind it to a pool or a river for the fun they enjoyed most of all — to get themselves sprayed from head to foot under its trunk.

The grateful animal worked unsparingly. It readily took upon itself the whole food store and the whole arsenal of the unit, as well as anyone who happened to be unfit for marching.

That Lomluong had a courageous as well as a devoted heart soon became evident.

One afternoon the Commander went for a bathe alone and ran into a tiger — the same starved tiger that had in fact been trailing the unit for several

days. As he was wading out into the stream he heard a twig snap in the bush. Turning round he saw the beast. It was watching him and running its tongue over its lips.

He had left his pistol on the shore, and his men were out of ear-shot. So man and beast, separated by an expanse of water, stood glaring at each other for what, to the former, seemed like an eternity.

Then heavy foot-falls were heard approaching. The tiger swung round, crouching, ready to spring.

"Lomluong! Lomluong!" Thang cried out.

The elephant rushed up and, without pausing, went straight for the tiger at top speed.

The tiger, deprived of its prey, sprung furiously. Lomluong, moving with unusual agility, dodged the charge and fought back grimly, his trunk in a solid coil, ready to spring, his tusks poised for the kill.

Meanwhile Thang had run up from the stream and snatching his pistol, was now looking for a chance to shoot. In one brief moment when the two animals came to a standstill, he took aim carefully and emptied the whole magazine into the head of the tiger. The beast, mortally wounded, reared up on its hind-legs snarling. Lomluong bore down upon it, gored it with its tusks and finished it off by trampling with the whole weight of its massive body.

Thang staggered toward the elephant and held its rough, hairy trunk against his chest. He felt moved with a new love for the animal, whose quiet existence till then he had hardly noticed, but who, in danger, had proved to be a loyal friend.

The men, alerted by the shots, came running to the scene and found Lomluong quietly munching leaves, the Commander enjoying a cigarette leaning against a tree at the elephant's side, and the mangled body of a tiger lying on the ground strewn with broken branches.

At the meal that evening the men were served meat, plenty of meat, instead of the customary vegetable dishes, and they talked and went on talking about Lomluong's latest exploit.

The elephant, unaware of the generous praises heaped upon it, conscientiously chewed away at its ration of sugar cane which Dik had made three times as big to mark the occasion.

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Perennial mounds of dead leaves and shaggy clumps of rotten wood had been removed and, under the shade of towering trees, a wide level arc had been cleared. The men were now working busily, building houses and communication trenches.

After a few days the camp was ready. The living-quarters consisted of a dozen roomy buildings covered with palm leaves. In the mess-hall planks were set on forked branches in orderly rows for use as tables and benches.

Outside, in the shade of the trees, hammocks were suspended.

The men had several days to rest after successive encounters with the enemy and endless journeys,

before further training in preparation for a new campaign.

Dik did not have to go through the training. His job was with the elephant. However, being a far-seeing youth, he told himself he must have an aid to take his place if he should get killed.

"I know I'm the least exposed to danger in action," he told the Commander. "But just in case I should be killed, there must be a replacement, one who is familiar with Lomluong. I need an assistant, not a casual assistant, but a permanent one."

The aid reported himself on the afternoon of the same day. He was Toan, section leader and member of "The Organization" [1]. He was a quiet man of middle age, and had many times distinguished himself in action.

That he should be given a section leader for aid was a surprise to Dik. "Why not an ordinary soldier ?" he asked himself. "A section leader is made to provide leadership, not to work under an elephant-keeper."

"Do you like the elephant ?" Dik asked by way of a test.

"Yes. It's an intelligent animal."

"Do you like your new job ?"

"No," Toan declared frankly. "I like the old one better." "But as I'm told to help you, I'll do my best to satisfy you," he added.

1. The Indochinese Communist Party, now the Viet Nam Workers' Party.

But how Toan could do his job well if he did not like it, Dik still did not understand.

"Are you ready to die for the elephant as you would die for someone you love with all your heart ?"

Toan did not see the point at once.

"Anyone can make an elephant work by beating it with a lance," Dik explained. "But very few people know that elephants must be treated like human beings."

"Don't get upset about it," Dik went on as Toan remained silent. "But you can't be a good mahout unless you really love your elephant."

Toan was indeed hurt, but he tried not to let personal feelings interfere with duty.

"Never mind, Dik," he said. "Perhaps I'll learn to love the elephant the way you love it, once I know it better. Meanwhile I'll do my job as well as I can."

Toan was a conscientious worker. He took great care of the elephant, giving it plenty to eat, grooming it to perfection, keeping the howdah and the ropes always in working order. He treated the elephant correctly, though with no special affection, and the elephant, to show its appreciation, would sniff at him with benevolent familiarity. Dik was very pleased. He found in Toan a warm hearted, hard-working mahout, to whom he readily imparted the whole secret of the trade transmitted to him by his grand-father.

The new aid, for his part, gradually developed a fondness for the elephant. He became more and more attached to Dik, and was completely won over by his young friend's candour and kindness. So he opened his heart to the youth, to whom he also taught the rudiments of the three R's and the military art.

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* *

Summer was passing into autumn. Up in the mountains it grew colder. Leaves started falling, and dusk would set in with a thin mist, which hang over roof-tops and, at night, condensed and fell to the ground in tiny drops.

The training was completed, and more time was available for personal matters. The men sat about doing things which would normally have been done for them by their mothers or sisters — mending clothes, replacing missing straps on rucksacks, making palm-leaf hats or ration trays Some even took pains to embellish towels or pillow-cases with embroidery, keeping their heads bent over their work like so many industrious maidens.

Dik could not understand how these grown men and soldiers could attach importance to such trifles. But on consideration he realised that he, too, must learn to provide for his own needs. "I'll have to mend my clothes, too," he told himself and, looking down at his work-hardened hands, he smiled at the idea of their doing needlework. "A needle will slip

through these clumsy fingers with no trouble," he commented aloud.

Then even these personal affairs were settled, and the soldiers became restless. Time hung heavy on their hands. Only the veterans remained unperturbed. They passed an exhausted pipe from hand to hand and looked condescendingly at the young ones. "Don't you fret, boys," they said. "These idyllic days won't last for ever."

Early one morning a liaison agent arrived at the camp. At noon, another appeared. A meeting was called. A large map was spread on a table and the officers, bending over it, debated with great animation.

Word had arrived for the men to be prepared for action. A new campaign was about to be launched. No more free time. Every body was busy making preparations.

The men were issued extra rations of rice, ammunition, antimalaria pills, and their favourite condiment — salt and ground chilli.

The mahout and his aid had also got everything in order for the journey. The elephant had been harnessed to his howdah, ready for loading. Lomluong too, was restless.

After dinner there was almost nothing left to do, and literally everybody was champing to be off. Sitting round the fire veterans told the young recruits of the unit's exploits in the previous campaign. People also tried to guess which way they would be going, discussed Lomluong's merits, and some talked of the folks at home.

Dik was thrilled. Lying in his hammock side by side with that of the aid and near the place where the elephant was breathing evenly, he looked up to the myriad twinkling blue stars which, seen though a light haze, appeared almost unreal. They seemed to float in the limitless space and to be beckoning to him to join them.

"So I'll be taking Lomluong on a new journey," he thought, looking for a star which had just vanished. "It's good that Lomluong will work again. I was beginning to be afraid he would become spoilt by inactivity, that he would become lazy and develop a liking for a sedentary life. But where shall we be going ? Shall we be any nearer to Takhan ? Or shall we be going still farther ? I wish I could see Granddad again. There are lots of things to tell him. No, I am not going to Takhan. That much is certain. I'm going to where the French are, which is in the opposite direction. I wonder if they'll allow me to have a close look at the French. If only I had a gun ! I'd carve a star on the howdah for each battle I take part in."

His hair was wet with dew without his being aware of it. Some night birds were calling forlornly away in the jungle. Dik put one hand to his face and discovered that it was wet too. He covered the hammock with a plastic sheet, and drew the blanket over his head. A moment later he was fast asleep.

Dik woke abruptly. A cold dew drop had fallen on his face. He rolled over to one side and adjusted the plastic sheet over the hammock. He tried to sleep again, but could not.

The night was unusually quiet. Hard by Toan was snoring steadily. At each gust of wind the leaves rustled loudly like so many sneaking feet. An owl roosting on a nearby tree gave a long hoot from time to time.

Dik was wide awake now. There was something unusual about the stillness of the night. Then he knew. He did not hear Lomluong snorting or slashing away at mosquitoes with his trunk and tail. He sat bolt upright and stared into the night. He saw no movement in the place usually occupied by Lomluong. He jumped to the ground and tiptoed there only to find the place empty. Where had the elephant gone ? He rushed back to the hammock, picked up his knife and went in search of the animal, guiding himself by the footprints.

He followed a long way but Lomluong was still nowhere to be seen. The footprints, however, were visible even in the faint starlight. Dik was sure he was on the right track. With all his senses alert, he tried to analyze even the faintest sound and the slightest scent. He listened attentively to the rustle of leaves to see if he could detect any sounds similar to that made by the elephant eating. A stream tumbling its way over boulders made him think instantly of Lomluong's feet wading in the water. He went on doggedly although it was almost completely hopeless for him ever to find Lomluong in

this immense jungle. Even when the jungle became thicker he still did not give up. He felt for footprints with both hands, and groped his way in complete darkness.

He tried to imagine what could have happened.

Of all the men who were fond of Lomluong for its loyalty, gentleness and helpfulness, Ngoan was the most enthusiastic. He would volunteer to fetch banana stems for the elephant, and his eyes would shine with pleasure when his contributions were appreciated by Lomluong.

Dik had disliked him at first sight because of his shifty eyes and his oily smiles, which would show up his pointed teeth. Ngoan was obsequious, and Dik, quiet by nature, did not trust flattering words and ready-made smiles. But he was gradually won over by the soldier's particular fondness for the elephant. A mouth organ which Ngoan came upon during an ambush and which he played noisily every time they were on the move, removed whatever reserve was left. What a wonderful thing! Dik had never beheld anything like that before. The chromium-plated instrument was only the size of a small comb, but it could "sing" almost everything. It did not sing like a human voice, of course; but listening to it Dik could mentally provide all the words of the songs. During a halt people would urge Ngoan to play something, and would clap and sing to the tune.

Dik was fascinated by the mouth organ. He listened to it with rapture, captivated by its exotic notes.

"Like it?" Ngoan asked him one day. They were sitting near the elephant, and Ngoan had been playing for some time.

Yes... I... er... I.. like it very much, "Dik admitted hesitantly.

"Have a try," Ngoan invited.

Dik took the thing in his hands, inspecting it with great curiosity. Then, timidly he looked at the soldier and put the instrument on his lips. The sudden flow of the notes — notes of all pitches, thin, silvery notes — made his heart jump with joy. He blew on the mouth organ again when Ngoan showed no sign of disapproval.

"Like to learn how to play it, my friend?" Ngoan winked at him.

"Yes. Very much."

"All right, I'll teach you, then," Ngoan slapped Dik's back, retrieved the mouth organ, and went away. But he remembered nothing of his promise until Dik had to remind him of it.

Dik devoted himself to the first lesson, and after a few days of hard work could reproduce "Guerrillas Song" fairly well. Eagerly he worked on other tunes, and soon became a regular entertainer in the unit.

"I'll give the mouth organ to you," Ngoan generously declared one day.

"You are not kidding, are you?"

"Why should I?"

"How generous of you!" Dik was overjoyed. He shook Ngoan's hand to show his gratitude.

"But there's something else... " Ngoan freed his hand from Dik's grip and smiled cunningly.

"What ?"

"You must make me a mahout."

"You like the job ?"

"Very much. As much as you like to play the mouth organ."

"There's no problem at all, then". Dik gave his agreement with much enthusiasm.

The training started the very next day. Ngoan was first introduced to Lomluong, and then showed how to get upon his back. The animal was friendly to people it knew, and managing it proved much easier than he had first thought. He just gave the correct orders and the elephant would do the right things. He also discovered a foible of elephants in general: their fondness for sweet things. So he would stuff Lomluong's mouth with brown candy of which he carried whole bars in his pockets.

"You'll spoil my elephant," Dik protested.

"Don't be too severe, my friend," Ngoan laughed between his teeth and went on feeding more sugar to Lomluong.

Had it not been for the magic spell cast upon him by the mouth organ Dik would have seen that Ngoan was not behaving naturally at all. He would come during the absence of Toan — the official aid — and would sneak off when the latter turned up. He put to Dik many questions about local customs and about many unrelated things. He was curious, too curious to be natural. But Dik was blind to all this. He always trusted his friend...

...It was too dark to follow Lomluong's footprints now, and Dik came to a halt. He wondered if the elephant had been affected by the southwesterly wind which had been blowing steadily for several days. The wind, coming from Laos, is known to have a strange effect on elephants. Perhaps this is because of the jungle scents it carries, scents which elephants know too well, and which make then ill with nostalgia. But if this had been the case Lomluong would have fought with his chains, bellowing like mad, and Dik would have heard. So what had really happened ?

Then the truth broke on him, like a blinding flash of light, as Dik recalled Ngoan's shifty eyes, his obsequious smiles, and his pointed teeth.

"You must make me a mahout."

"You like the job ?"

"Very much..."

There was no doubt Ngoan had unchained the elephant and taken it away. Most of the men scrupulously kept a respectful distance from Lomluong, awed by the sheer bulk of its great body, and the only people who could manage it were Dik, Toan and Ngoan.

Dik was hot with shame for being such a sucker. He was divided between continuing the search and reporting to the unit. One thing he was sure was that Lomluong must be found at any cost. Without it the operation would be delayed, and the many tons of guns and ammunition it usually carried effortlessly would have to be added to personal packs.

"Lomluong... Lomluong..." he called out.

"Lomluong... Lomluong..." came back the echoes. Silence surged back. He could hear tiny feet trotting on dead leaves. That could be a fox on a hunt, or a frightened porcupine...

Then he stepped on some elephant dung. It was cold. The elephant must have gone a long way. He would soon reach the open road and would be gone for ever.

Dik quickened his steps, making more cuts on trees to mark his way.

Dawn was breaking. At the camp the men must have been up already, and must have noticed the absence of the elephant, Ngoan and Dik. They must be talking and some would even hold him suspect, chumming up with Ngoan the way he did. He could not avoid that.

He tried to assure himself that the Commander and Toan would not believe idle talk, but still he felt indignant that some people should think ill of him.

Dik told himself he must not let the traitor get away with the elephant, that he would rather die than abandon the chase.

When it grew light he climbed a towering tree and surveyed the immense expanse of green jungle below, trying to detect some movement. Seeing nothing he got down and went on.

The trail led him to a village. By this time it was midday and people were cooking. Smoke was rising from the roof of every house. Dik felt very

hungry but he did not want to rest, obsessed by his only purpose : to retrieve the elephant and arrest the traitor.

"Hey you ! Where you going ?" someone hailed.

Dik was startled and looked up. A middle-aged man was standing on the road and looking at him suspiciously. His skin was as brown as bronze, and he was holding a lance.

"Where you going ?" the man repeated. His tone was hostile.

Dik looked into the man's eyes to size him up.

"I'm just going my way. Why do you want to know ?"

"Just want to know. You're a stranger here."

"You live here ?" Dik asked.

"Yes." The man seemed to be pleased with Dik's boldness and directness. "In this village," he added, pointing the direction with his lance.

"I'm an honest man," Dik declared. "Let me go."

The man rested his lance on the ground and continued to stare at Dik.

"I'm looking for an elephant," Dik explained. Did you happen to see it ?"

"Saw one," the man answered.

"How long ago ? Which way was it going ?"

"Just now. Why are you going after it ?"

Dik was getting impatient.

"Stop asking, please. I'm in a hurry. It's my elephant. I must catch up with it before it goes too far."

"You will. You're on the right track."

"Thanks" Dik said and started to go.

"Just a moment," the man stopped him. "How long have you been travelling?"

"Since last night."

"You must be hungry now. Come along. I'll give you something to eat."

"I'll be late, you know."

"No. Not late." The man smiled enigmatically.

"You a soldier?" the man asked again, looking at Dik from head to foot.

Dik nodded.

"And the man riding the elephant? He also a soldier?"

"No!" Dik cried out. "He's a thief."

"I thought the same," the man remarked. "He wanted to go to the open road. Why? The French are there."

"So you showed him the way?" Dik was alarmed.

"No. Sent him another way. We wanted to take the elephant."

"The elephant belongs to the army," Dik was outraged.

"I know. So we didn't take it."

"You also are a mahout?"

The man nodded sadly. "But my elephant was killed. The French killed it," he said.

"I'm also a mahout. You know how a mahout feels when he loses his elephant. I must go now. I'll stop and see you on the way back. So long."

"No need to hurry," the man insisted. "I like the elephant, so I sent the traitor in the wrong direction. He'll run into a swamp and return. We'll retrieve the elephant then."

"Suppose he went another way?"

"There's no other way. Come with me and eat something, then I'll go with you."

The man lived at the edge of the village. The house was almost empty. The only occupant was lying shivering on the floor, wrapped in a cover made of shredded bark.

"Who's that?"

"The wife. She's sick. People say she's possessed by the devil. She'll die."

"Fever?"

"Yes." The man spoke sorrowfully.

Dik fumbled in his pocket and produced a small box. He opened the box and extracted several pills from it.

"What's that?"

"Medicine. This cures the fever."

"True?" The man was interested.

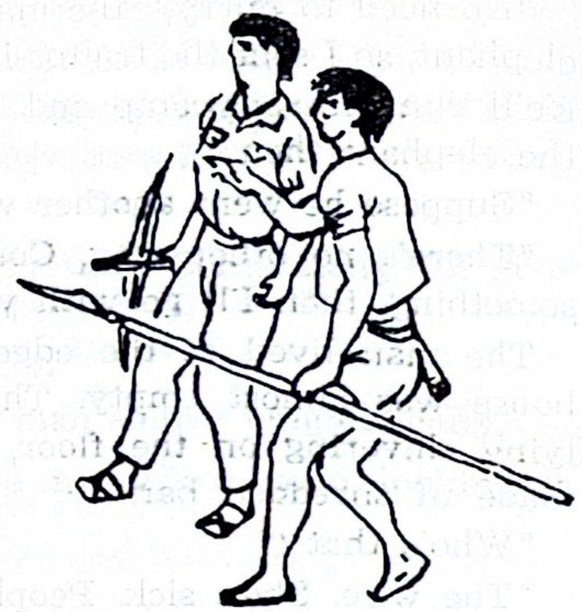
"True." And to prove his good faith Dik put two pills into his own mouth and swallowed. Then he gave some to the woman, together with a cup of water.

"You're good," the man said. "I'll help you".

After Dik had eaten the man gave him a crossbow and a full quiver. He picked up his lance and told Dik to come with him.

"You're very kind," Dik said with emotion.

"It's all right. You and I are of the same kind. The traitor wants to go over to the French. We must arrest him."



By dusk they heard the elephant. Dik was the first to see Lomluong behind a grove of trees. Ngoan was sitting on the neck of the elephant and was cursing and beating him with the butt of his rifle in a desperate effort to make him go on. The elephant, unaccustomed to harsh treatment, was perplexed. He went forward by fits and starts, rearing its head in bewilderment. It could not comprehend why its rider should be angry and why it had been put on a forced march through the night and for a whole day without the reassuring company of its master and friends.

Looking at his tired elephant Dik could see that Lomulong had been given nothing to eat, and he boiled with anger. He went up-wind of the animal, took off his shirt, hung it on a branch, and retraced his steps. He must wait till nightfall to be sure of success : the traitor had a rifle.

The unwilling elephant moved very slowly. Nearing the tree on which Dik's shirt was hanging

it stopped short and bellowed hopefully : it had come upon the smell of its master. Despite the blows raining on its head and heedless of the curses of its rider, it refused to go any further, but turned round and round in search of the source of the familiar scent. Then it found the shirt. It made a dash for the object, snatched it off the branch, held it up in its trunk, waving it frantically trumpeting at the top of its voice. Ngoan was utterly confounded. In the growing darkness he could not make out the object that was fluttering before his strained eyes.

Dik tiptoed up, levelled the crossbow at the traitor, and let fly an arrow. At that very second the elephant made a forward movement, unwittingly saving the man on his neck. Quickly, Dik released another arrow hitting the enemy on the shoulder. The traitor lurched forward but caught himself back in time, He turned himself about and fired a shot in the direction from which the arrows had come. The bullet hissed past Dik's head.

Dik changed places quickly from one bush to another. The enemy meanwhile had hurled himself flat on the ground taking cover behind a tree. Now he fired carefully, aiming at wherever there was the least movement. Dik, sure that he could not be seen, harassed the enemy with his arrows. He wanted to call for Lomluong, who appeared to be perplexed by this sudden bustle, but thought better of it : the elephant might be a ready target for the traitor. As long as he believed he could still escape

with Lomluong, Ngoan would not destroy his means of transport.

The traitor, judging by the manner in which the arrows had been shot, was certain that there was only one attacker, he also felt sure that with his rifle he could control the situation. Confident of these circumstances he began to take the offensive. Moving quickly but cautiously he closed in upon his adversary.

All the while Dik's companion had been hiding behind a tree. Now he left his place, tightened his grip on the lance, and moved forward half-crouching.

* * *

It was time to change guards, and the section leader on duty was coming up with the replacement. Not finding Ngoan at the usual place he left the relieving sentry there and went off on a search. Then he discovered the absence of Dik and Lomluong.

The section leader made a report to the command, and an emergency meeting was called. The officers went over Ngoan's record, and analysed his behaviour, which they had found rather odd lately, and came to the conclusion that he had deserted, taking Lomluong along.

Ngoan used to be a sergeant in the puppet army. When he had been captured he declared that he would redeem his criminal past. It is possible that

at that time he meant every word he said, but had since found life in the Resistance Army too hard for his taste and had finally succumbed to the hope of securing for himself an easy life in the occupation army.

Dik was free of all suspicion. It was concluded that he must have gone after his elephant and its ravisher. The only blame was that he had not given the alarm, and everybody feared for him, knowing that the deserter was armed with a rifle.

Toan and two picked scouts were sent out. They started at once, but, unable to find the traces Dik had left, they had to grope their way about. It was not until daybreak that they stumbled upon the frequent cuts on the trees and the fairly distinct elephant footprints going the same way. From then on they quickened their pace.

Night was falling fast. The rescue party was about to make use of an electric torch when rifle shots were heard ahead.

"Hurry, lads!" Toan urged. "Dik's in danger!"

The three sprang forward, past thorny bushes, through entanglements of tough creepers, over rocky humps on the ground. Their rifles at the ready ,burning to kill the traitor and save their comrade and their pet.

* * *

Once more Dik fired his crossbow and instantly knew the arrow had hit home : there was a startled cry of pain. He waited for the enemy to reply with his rifle — the breech had clicked a moment before — but nothing happened. Dik moved to another place after hurling an exploratory clod in the direction of the enemy. Still no movement. Dik stood up, and then he saw the traitor bearing down upon him. Dik was transfixed. Before he could regain his wits, his companion, emerged from behind a tree and hurled himself in the path of the traitor. The man raised his lance and was about to thrust it into the panting chest of Ngoan when the latter opened fire. The good man reared up on the balls of his feet, his hands clawing the air. His lance dropped to the ground, and he fell after it.

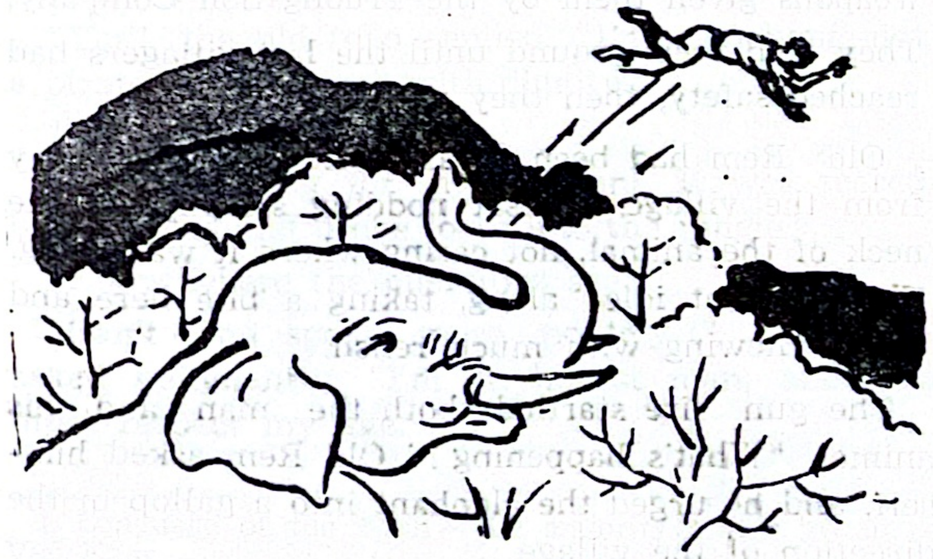
Dik clenched his teeth and hurled himself at the enemy. The latter stepped aside and raised his gun for a point blank shot. But at that instant he received a terrific blow on the back from something hard. It was Lomluong's trunk. The gun was knocked from his hands, and he fell on his knees.

"Lomluong !" Dik cried for help. The traitor now knew the identity of his adversary. He crawled on all fours to escape the deadly trunk. But the elephant spotted him, curled his trunk around him in a tight knot, lifted him bodily off the ground, and hurled him into the air.

When the rescue party arrived on the scene they were greeted by silence. They made a ring around Dik and congratulated him. Lomluong had also

moved forward. Gently it pushed the two scouts aside, lifted first Dik and then Toan up and placed them on his back. Next it went to the wounded stranger who was groaning with pain. With infinite care he raised him up with his trunk and eased him down on the howdah. The man had a long glancing wound on his left shoulder. By the light of his electric torch Toan quickly dressed the wound while the two scouts made a search for the body of the traitor which they hastily buried.

The elephant, with the whole party resting comfortably on its back, headed back for the village, There he was fed by Toan, while Dik went out again with a torch to pick the necessary medicinal herbs. Then, after they had given the man into the charge of the local guerrillas, Dik, Toan and the two scouts rode Lomluong back to the unit. The elephant was travelling at a great speed now, sure of his own homegoing footprints.



The French Commando Company had travelled all night. By dawn it was nearing New Takhan. The morning mist was thick, and it was only after the enemy had reached the top of the slope, which levelled off at the gate of the village, that the alert was sounded. The guards, let loose an avalanche of rocks and a hail of arrows, striking the nearest enemy troops. The rest of the enemy force reacted quickly. They ran for cover behind the trees on either side of the road and opened fire. From down the slope a mortar began sending round after round to the top of the hill.

The women, the children and the old folks retreated into their emergency huts in the jungle while the guerrillas rushed out to set the traps and reinforce the guards.

Unruffled by the overwhelming fire power of the enemy, they fought back grimly with the few weapons given them by the Truong Son Company. They held their ground until the last villagers had reached safety, then they withdrew.

Old Rem had been grazing Lekdam far away from the village. He sat nodding sleepily on the neck of the animal, not caring where it was going. The elephant idled along, taking a bite here and there, chewing with much relish.

The gun fire startled both the man and his animal. "What's happening ?" Old Rem asked himself, and he urged the elephant into a gallop in the direction of the village.

Out in the open he saw black smoke rising up from Takhan. The enemy was setting fire to the village! Old Rem pulled up by the side of the road and stayed there watching. A moment later, the enemy came out of the village. There were many of them, walking in single file like ants. Their camouflage battle dress made them almost invisible.

A group separated from the main column and ran up the slope. They returned again to the column soon dragging a child along. The child struggled frantically and must be calling for help, but nothing could be heard because of the distance. Old Rem saw the enemy troops shaking their arms and throwing up their heads. Perhaps they were laughing like mad. Unable to contain himself any longer he put Lekdam to a gallop with intent to intercept the enemy and free the child.

"Hey, you there!" One of the enemy troops called out to him as he appeared. He was an interpreter. "You speak Kinh ?"[1]

"Yes", the old man replied. "I'm a mahout, not a pirate," he declared with dignity.

"Where you going ?"

"I was looking for my elephant. It was scared by the guns and broke loose into the jungle."

"Know where the guerrillas are ?"

"Can't you speak more politely ?" Old Rem asked indignantly. "I'm an honest man, and you must respect my age."

1. Language of the Kinh — the majority ethnic group in Viet Nam.

"Oh well... How shall I address you then ?"

"My name is Rem. Call me Mister Rem."

The interpreter said something to the French officer, and both shook with laughter.

"Now, Mister Rem," the interpreter said with a wink. "Do you know where the guerrillas have gone to ?"

"Why not ?" Old Rem said, running his fingers through his beard and looking up at the high mountains beyond the jungle.

"Show us the way, then."

"How much ?"

"How much what ?" The interpreter was puzzled.

"Money."

The interpreter turned to the officer again. The latter laughed aloud but stopped immediately. He drew a pistol out of its holster and pointed it at the chest of the old man.

"Money for you, old dog ? Will this do ?" he asked with a threatening scowl.

"Don't call me names !" Old Rem retorted. "I don't like that. I'm the second oldest man in the village next to old Pa."

"Go ahead ! Shoot me," he taunted, baring his chest. "I'm too old anyway, and old people are not afraid to die. If you want me to show you the way, you must pay me. That's all."

"You are greedy, Mister Rem." the interpreter said placatingly. "You'll have your reward, but show us the way first."

"No, pay first." Old Rem was adamant.

They gave in. The officer extracted from his pocket two silver-piastres and gave them to him. The old man said this was not worth his while, and the officer gave him another coin.

The old man toyed with the money. If only he could somehow give it to the child. It would be a great help to a poor family. But as he had his own plan, he tucked the coins under his belt.

"Listen, Mister Rem !" the officer said. "You folks used to be a simple lot. But you've changed. Now you live only for money. You're greedy ! But it's all right by us. Work for us and you'll have plenty of money."

The old man nodded as the statement was translated to him.

"Hey." he suddenly beckoned the little boy to come near and told him in his native tongue. "They have set you free, boy. Now go straight home and tell the people there that granddad is still busy leading the way for their excellencies in their search for the guerrillas and won't be home before nightfall, see ?"

The old man chained the elephant to a tree and felt all of a sudden an overwhelming sadness. He murmured to the beast "This is the end, Lekdam my dear ! I'll never see you again. Adieu, my friend, my companion who has so faithfully shared my life ! Adieu !"

Thinking that the old man was going to head for the jungle and leave it alone for a moment, as he had so often done before, coming back later to

unchain it. Lekdam looked at its master indifferently, which made the old man fly into a fury.

"Oh you fat-headed beast! You don't understand a thing. You'll never see me again. Why don't you bellow? Why don't you rub that trunk of yours against my shoulder the way you used to do whenever I left you?"

He wanted to fondle the elephant's trunk but thought better of it, for fear that the enemy might suspect his intentions. He only eyed Lekdam tenderly for the last time and then nonchalantly walked up to the soldiers.

"Now will your excellencies go with me?" he suggested.

They were in two minds, for they wanted to bring the boy and the elephant along as hostages. And the old man knew that.

"Afraid I'll run away? Set your minds at peace." Old Rem said. "I've got your money for the job and I swear before God we'll live and die together!"

Then pointing at his side, he defied them:

"Put your gun here if you don't believe me and let's go. And don't force me to drive the elephant to our destination or it will be you who'll die. The thuds of the beat's heavy footfall will certainly rouse the guerillas to action and we'll be met by a hail of poisoned arrows!"

He strode ahead and again urged them:

"Follow me, will you? God be my witness I won't give you the slip."

The enemy were far from convinced but at last they had to let go the boy and the elephant with some reluctance. Then they hastened after the old man who was now walking in the direction of the swamp.

Old Rem's mind was furiously at work as he walked. "Unchained by the boy. Lekdam will amble back to Srung who, not seeing me on his back and after hearing the boy's explanation, will certainly try to come to my rescue. And the elephant will scent its way back to the place to which I am leading the enemy. It depends... if Srung arrives too soon or too late. In the first case, Srung may be caught by the enemy; in the second, my traces may be erased by rain and sun and the Takhan people will never know what has happened to me or to the enemy."

He hoped Srung would understand the truth and later relate it to Dik. He wished he could say just a few words to his dear grandson before this parting to wish him happiness and tell him not to grieve over his grandpa's death for he had lived his life well. But who could help him send such a message?

His heart melted as he brooded over Dik's loneliness. Poor boy! But he couldn't help it anyway. He tried to suppress his sorrow, drew himself up to his full height and walked on briskly.

The forlorn track wound its way to the Black Swamp, an immense stretch of mud and water covered with dense green wild grass. The only access to its hidden heart was a vague trail of some

sort, so narrow you could only set down one foot at a time on its perilous surface. People normally gave a wide berth to the Swamp but it had become quite familiar to the Takhan mahouts who had more than once come here in search of new hunting grounds. They had once seen with their own eyes a whole herd of wild buffaloes sink to their death when they foolishly stepped in for some fresh grass and a wallow in the inviting mud.

The old man stopped at the bank of the Swamp.

"Roll up your pants," he said peremptorily. "The trail is difficult here. We must proceed with light feet then!"

The officer detached himself from the ranks, walked up to the old man and eyed him with suspicion.

"What does that muddy trail mean?" he barked.

"That's the only way, sir," the old man replied.

"How deep is the mud?" the Frenchman asked after a pause.

"Ankle-deep in mud, I reckon, and knee-deep in water, sir," the old man said.

The officer pointed his finger threateningly at the old man and said:

"Look here, old man. You're damned mistaken if you think you can fool us. You won't get away with it!"

"Well, this is the only way to our destination, sir," the old man protested. "And if you don't like it you can always let me go. I'll give you back your money!"

The officer took a good look at the Swamp and could see nothing strange about it. Only a stretch of lush grass that looked moderately inoffensive—like a wide fertile valley.

He positioned the machine guns and the mortars at vantage points and told his men to get ready for combat. The Swamp was very wide and he did not feel inclined to have his men cross it in Indian file for fear that it might take too long. He preferred that the platoon should negotiate it in formation of several men abreast, with a space of a dozen yards between each rank. The men staying behind to give them cover would follow on once the platoon had come safely to the opposite side.

To dissipate their fears, the old man boldly stepped into the Swamp, treading on the obscure mud trail he knew so well. The grass moved pleasantly under him and cool water bathed his feet.

"They have fallen into my trap," the old man gleefully congratulated himself. "Just a few yards from the bank and they'll find under them a yawning pit of churning, greedy mud..."

The first group was marching right behind him. The second group waited till the first one had been a score of steps ahead before they joined in. Then it was the turn of the third group. Then came the fourth one, bringing up the rear.

The old man walked on his toes feeling so elated he could have sung out loud. The enemy troops were trudging close to his heels. "Just a few more steps. Just a few more steps," the old man mentally encouraged them. And it was not long before he

heard the ominous sucking sounds of legs and feet becoming gripped in the mud. He whipped round and looked challengingly at the enemy. The first and second group were struggling in vain to move forward in the morass. They saw with horror the grass disappear under their weight and the more they struggled the deeper they sank. The third and the fourth ranks tried to beat a retreat but it was already too late. They only had a few moments left before the vengeful Swamp claimed its victims.

The officer himself lost his balance and twisted furiously. His legs were stuck fast in the mud, knee-deep then thigh-deep. Every move he tried only brought him down deeper. He made one last desperate jerk to pull out one of his legs only to find the mud swallow him up to his waist. He roared out in despair and pointed his pistol at the old man who, seeing the officer's predicament, thrust the shaft of his lance into the mud and stared defiantly at the Frenchman.

"Don't like seeing death face to face, do you?" he jeered. "You want to call off your operation?" The old man laughed loud now. "Your fates are sealed, you bandits!... Go on struggling, fools. Nothing can save you now!" Then straddling his legs, arms akimbo, he shouted: "Shoot me now!"

Suddenly the French officer let go of his pistol, which disappeared soundlessly in the mud. Realizing that the best way to keep afloat was not to make any forceful moves, he cautiously turned his head over his shoulder and, sobbing, begged for help:

"Help me out, oh help me out! I'm dying!"

The mud had reached his chest now. The men on the bank shook their heads impotently. Some shrugged their shoulders and threw up their hands as if in despair. The heaviest of the soldiers had now sunk to their throats. Then came their gurgling cries as they disappeared under the muddy water.

The soldiers on the bank became engaged in a heated argument. Then they fastened together some cords to make a longer one, fixed one end to a branch and flung the rest of the line to their trapped mates. But it was still too short and couldn't reach the struggling men. After some more attempts, they gave up in despair. Meanwhile, the officer was sinking inch by inch, slowly but inexorably. Now only his head could be seen. The sticky muddy water poured into his gasping mouth. He tried to heave himself up, spat, coughed violently and then went down again, deeper this time, until all that was left of him was a spiralling cone of dirty foam that soon disappeared.

The soldiers on the bank took aim at the old man, screaming hysterically:

"You too, traitor,, will die a miserable death."

The old man's eyes swept over the whole scene, making sure that every enemy soldier, even the farthest from him, could not escape, and nodded contentedly to himself. He did not bother to answer their threat. "No, that's where you're wrong you thugs!" he thought. "I'll die in peace now that I've avenged myself and my people."

The soldiers opened fire. The old man bounced as the bullets hit him and slowly fell face down on the fresh, sweet murmuring grass. But he was not dead yet for after a while he raised his head for one last look at the sinking enemy. The bunch of grass under his chest curled up as if to give him support for this last effort...

Nobody in Takhan village was there to witness the enemy's horrible end and the old man's heroic death. It was not until Lekdam and the little boy turned up at his shanty that Srung learned the news and, together with other mahouts, set out in haste to the old man's rescue.

They let the elephants sniff at the old man's clothing and these clever beasts, familiar with his scent, searched the ground and quickly led the mahouts to where the old man had gone.

The trail came to a check at the Black Swamp and the elephants, feeling the soft earth move under their feet, stopped dead and bellowed a warning before retracing their steps.

The truth all of a sudden dawned upon Srung and the mahouts. So the old man had lured the enemy to this spot and let the Swamp do the rest, swallowing up a whole enemy platoon.

The crushed grass tufts were slowly straightening up again into their old shapes, swaying indifferently in a gentle breeze. Here and there some broad-brimmed jungle hats were seen scattered on the green surface of the swamp.

In the golden afternoon light, the lance of the old hero now and then glinted like a flame — or like the spark of an angry eye that kept watching

for the enemy. The lance was still there in the middle of the swamp, driven deep into the ground but without its owner, and they all knew why...

The old man was no more and that saddened their hearts. In their imagination they could see Old Rem still standing there, towering, defiant, contemptuous as he had been when confronting the enemy.

* * *

At the mustering place, darkness was setting in as night fell. The starry sky high above was invisible through the dense foliage of the jungle. From the shadowy clusters of men came subdued murmur of discussion and the cold click-clack of the rifles.

The beam of a flashlight flared up and swept along the ranks revealing young and determined faces and their dim figures in full combat gear with rucksacks over their shoulders and rifles in hand.

An order rang out and the column of men moved silently forward, their feet treading softly on the dead leaves that crackled faintly under their weight. In a few moments, stillness had settled again over the jungle.

Dik watched with envy the armymen disappearing one by one into the pitch-dark night and when the last of them had vanished, he felt very lonely. The whole company was gone and there remained in this strange valley only himself, his aide, the elephant and some army cooks.

Never had silence seemed to him so loud. Not a leaf rustled. Not a wailing call of a night bird. Even the brook had ceased its babbling and continued its course in sullen meditation.

Dik picked up a rotten log that gave off a strange twinkling phosphorescent light to light his way into the jungle, where he intended to try and find a good shelter for the elephant. It was not until dawn that he found a good one in a mountain cul-de-sac, surrounded by solid rock walls with an entrance wide enough for Lomluong to enter. He smoothed the ground, clearing it of all sharp stone splinters to make it comfortable for his elephant. And though he did not know when the battle would start, he still ordered Lomluong to knell down so that he could swiftly mount it when the signal came. Lomluong lay down, slung its trunk over its back and closed its eyes. But it did not fall asleep for its ears were alert, eagerly waiting for its master's order.

By the entrance, Toan had fastened their two field hammocks to the trees side by side. Lying luxuriously in his hammock, Dik peered through an open space in the foliage overhead and beheld a patch of clear sky in which some night birds were gliding.

After a sound sleep through the night, the jungle was now slowly coming back to life. The air was pleasantly fresh and fragrant but Dik was so nervous he could not appreciate it. Being a hard worker, he usually got up before other people at sunrise

and would quietly slip into the woods for an inspection of his snares or to shoot some game with his crossbow. This morning however he must remain here idle waiting for something very big to happen — he listened anxiously for the first report of a gun, the signal for the campaign to start.

Toan was watching Dik from his hammock. Seeing Dik so listless although his eyes were wide open, Toan knew he was in deep meditation. Dik had grown into a quiet man who seldom laughed aloud or talked or confided in other people. He was one who kept his own counsel.

"Let's snatch some sleep now, Dik," Toan said softly. "There'll be a lot of things to do today. We won't be of much use if we don't sleep properly."

"But I can't," Dik said, "There's something in me that keeps me from sleeping. It's very unusual, you know".

"Just try to," Toan insisted.

"I'm sorry but I can't," Dik said.

Suddenly they heard a loud explosion and the ground shook violently. Then came a series of other deafening sounds. Dik hurriedly leapt from his hammock.

"What is it, Toan ?" he asked.

Though familiar with battles of this kind, Toan still felt a strange excitement run through him. He got up quickly.

"Our mines have exploded. Our mines. I tell you !" he shouted.

The reverberation of the loud reports was still lingering when fire-arms of every kind spoke up, producing a rolling echo that rendered Lamluong's heavy breathing almost inaudible.

Bewildered, Dik asked Toan:

"What should we do now, Toan?"

"Wait for the order to drive our elephant to the battlefield for the wounded and the booty.

Dik strained his ears for the smallest sound, and kept nodding with obvious pleasure.

The firing went on for some time then abruptly stopped. Then all was quiet again — so quiet Dik could hear his own breathing.

"Hurrah!" Toan cheered. "The enemy has been routed. Let's undo our hammocks, quick!"

"How come you know that, Toan?" Dik queried.

"By experience of course," Toan explained. "If our troops beat a retreat, the enemy would never stop firing." He paused for breath then with shining eyes added, "When the firing all of a sudden goes quiet, then you can be sure that the enemy has been routed, see? If you were now at the scene you would hear our shock troops shouting."

They rolled up their hammocks and got themselves ready to set off with their elephant.

A moment later, the liaison boy came dashing down the slope. He cupped his mouth with his hands and yelled out to Dik and Toan:

"Bring your elephant to the battlefield!"

They leapt onto the beast's back. Lomluong got up on its feet, quickly made its way through the

shelter entrance and galloped to where the voice had come from.

"Coming! Coming!" Dik shouted back rapturously.

Dik was so carried away he wished he could fly to the battlefield.

The elephant plunged ahead. Bushes, trees... were receding into the background. And though the undergrowth was thick, Dik still urged Lomluong on; he and his aid had to flatten themselves against the beast's neck to avoid being hurled off by low branches.

The company was withdrawing from the battlefield marching in the direction of Dik and Toan. They cheered as they caught sight of Lomluong. Their faces were blackened by gun smoke but looked radiant. Each of them had at least two or three rifles slung over his shoulder. Some were trudging along with two heavy ammunition cases hung from a pole over their shoulders.

They made way for Lomluong and laughingly waved to the beast:

"Hurry up, Lomluong! They're waiting for you up there!"

"A mountain of stuff! The load will break your back, Lomluong!" a man cried exuberantly.

"Hi there, mahouts! Treat yourselves to some rifles! Don't fail to choose good ones!"

"I'd give them a heavy machine-gun to mount on the howdah! How majestic they would look then!"

A team of machine-gunners walked past. They eyed Lomluong tenderly:

"Hello, Storm! Hello you mahouts!"

"Don't forget Lomluong's services! Without him, the machine guns would have run short of ammo!"

"Give him some lumps of sugar then!" someone suggested.

Dik flourished his lance in greeting and suddenly became lively.

"Good morning to you all, comrades! Got many marks (1) on our rifle butts?"

"Yes!"

Dik asked the men who were passing close under the howdah: "And you, how many marks?"

"Four," one of them replied.

"And you?" Dik asked a young armyman.

"Oh, not so many. Only two!" he modestly replied

"That's fine!" Dik comforted him.

"But you too, mahouts, you should do something to remember the battles by," a man suggested.

"Why not?" Dik replied. "For every victory we'll carve a star on the howdah!"

Their laughter resounded in the jungle.

Dik and Toan had reached the top of the pass now.

After the fury of battle the Phython's Back Pass again looked sweet and peaceful. Patches of cloud were leisurely sailing across the sky, casting their immense shadows on the jungle canopy. The big

1. The practice of carving a mark on the butt for each enemy killed.

road, sprinkled with dancing lights, wound its way through the green groves and moss-covered mountain sides. A wild brook could be seen merrily rushing down over great boulders in the distance and the soft roar of its waters floated up to the summit of the pass.

The elephant galloped over the pass down to the battlefield. There was complete silence — as if the jungle was still in a daze after such a terrible combat. A fighter was standing guard at a curve in the road, holding his bayonet at the ready. Not far from him lay the shattered carcass of a blown-up jeep. Oil kept dropping from its smashed engine down onto the blood spattered road.

Dik could see from afar a corpse sprawling on the body of the car and as he got near the scene he discovered another on the brink of a crater thrown up by a powerful mine. He stopped the elephant for a better examination. The man must have died in terror. His face was distorted and his glassy eyes were staring at the black stone blocks on the mountain side, his open mouth suggested an ear-splitting scream that had not had time to finish.

Dik gazed at the two corpses and thought of his bombarded village, of their murdered elephants... "It serves you right!" he muttered with satisfaction.

He felt he could have let Lomluong trample on those dead bandits just for the satisfaction of hearing their bones crack under the beast's colossal feet to enjoy the feeling of revenge. But he restrained

himself, not wanting to be so vindictive. Slowly, he drove the elephant on.

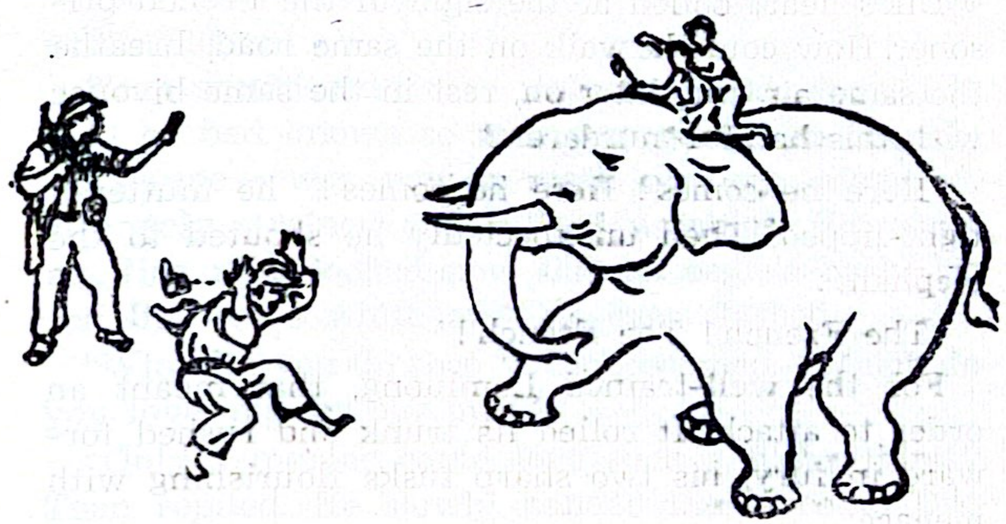
The enemy had suffered heavy casualties. The road ahead was black with enemy bodies and crushed burnt-up vehicles, some of which were still smoking. Close to the roadside, a rock wall protruded at a slant looking so precarious it might topple at any moment. Even the trees were badly torn and their wounds were bleeding sap.

Lomluong trudged on, keeping away from the corpses. It breathed noisily as if in disgust. It stopped at every destroyed vehicle for the men of the booty group to load the guns and ammunition onto its back. Now and then, a jovial soldier would treat Lomluong to some snow-white cubes of sugar held on the palm of his hand.

The howdah on Lomluong back was now full to the brim with all kinds of fire-arms — rifles, sub-machine-guns, pistols... There was even a brand-new heavy machine-gun which had been dismounted from an armoured car.

Dik fastened his eyes on the rifles. He never dreamed of anything so much as a rifle. A rifle of his own. "If I had my own rifle, its butt would soon be full of marks!" Dik said to himself. Then he sighed and said to Toan in a voice husky with longing :

"Let's ask for a rifle this time, Toan. For Lomluong's sake, you know. Long dark nights, wild beasts, strange trails and all that... How are we mahouts to defend our elephant ? With bare hands ? Do you think the commander would give us one ?"



"May be he will," Toan said. "Everyone in the company has got his rifle. Now it should be our turn to be provided with a rifle. An old one, huh ?"

"Well, yes, an old one. It'll be O.K.," Dik joyfully agreed.

The elephant was walking to the other end of the battlefield for some more captured rifles and ammunition when Dik saw a prisoner coming in his direction. A live, robust, unscathed French soldier, one of the bandits who had caused so many deaths and sufferings to his people and upon whom Dik had for so long thirsted to avenge himself.

The prisoner staggered along with a cowed look on his face. He was bare-footed and a pair of shoes was dangling over his shoulder. His own shoes. Now and then he glanced stealthily at his victorious enemies, ready to smile ingratiatingly at them, but he hung his head when he saw the flashes of anger in their eyes.

Dik's heart boiled at the sight of the French prisoner. How could he walk on the same road, breathe the same air and, later on, rest in the same bivouac with this hateful murderer ?

"Here he comes ! Here he comes !" he muttered tight-lipped. Then unexpectedly he shouted to the elephant :

"The French ! The French !"

For the well-trained Lomluong, that meant an order to attack. It rolled its trunk and rushed forward in fury, his two sharp tusks flourishing with menace.

The prisoner winced. His eyes darted frantically about for shelter and as the elephant came at him he plunged suddenly behind his captor, trembling like a leaf.

The guard himself was bewildered, not knowing why the furious elephant was charging in his direction.

Next moment Toan hastily snatched the lance from Dik's hand and brought it heavily down on Lomluong's head, yelling :

"Halt ! Halt !"

Haste had changed his voice, turning it into a shrill shriek.

At this urgent command, the elephant stiffened the joints of its knees but the impetus of the charge sent it skidding on for some distance before it came to a dead stop, which almost catapulted the riders off its neck.

Dik turned his head over his shoulder.

"Give me back my lance !" he said, quivering with rage.

Toan shuddered as he looked at Dik's face. The face he had known so well — so gentle, so smooth, so serene — was now a mask of fury, distorted, strangely strained and full of wrinkles. His usual aquiline nose looked now like an eagle's beak, his red lips were white and his eyes flashed.

"Why did you do that ?" Dick boomed. "Which do you love, him or our men ?"

"Only a maniac could love such a filthy thing." Toan replied. He slowly handed the lance to Dik, saying in a measured, severe tone.

"Here it is. Keep it but don't you forget the rules about prisoners of war !"

Dik closed his fingers around the lance shaft and glared moodily at Toan. Then all of a sudden he began to plead :

"No, I didn't forget the rules," he said earnestly, "but please don't try to prevent me. Just think of our murdered people and our slaughtered elephants who day and night call on us to avenge their death ! You're my friend and you should help me to carry out their wish. I don't care what kind of punishment I must face later."

Toan shook his head with disapproval. He tried to reason with Dik :

"A real friend is a friend who will prevent you from doing a bad thing. You make a mistake if you break a regulation, even unintentionally. But your fault is clearly graver if you try to break it wilfully, you know. If we got into the habit of beating

up or killing war prisoners then what would be the situation ? You're a hunter and you know how violently a beast will react when it is at bay and realizes that it is going to die. The same will apply to the enemy when we drive them to the wall. They will fight to their death and then there will be more of our own dead — casualties that could be avoided. Don't tell me that's the way to avenge our people !"

Toan bent down and told the guard to quickly lead the prisoner, who was still trembling, away from the elephant. Perhaps he could now guess what had made the mahout drive his elephant at him for he kept glancing at Dik out of the corners of his eyes.

"We're fighting not only for the purpose of being revenged," Toan said patiently, looking into Dik's eyes, "but for a much nobler cause. We're fighting for the salvation of our people, our villages, our nation."

He paused then asked affectionately.

"The inhabitants of Takhan won't be pleased if we do otherwise, will they ?"

Seeing that his explanation had gone home and Dik was calming down, Toan gently turned the mahout back to his old position so that he could see the road on which he was to drive the elephant.

"Let's go now, Dik ! We should try to finish loading up and get out of here quickly before the enemy planes come."

Dik urged the elephant on. He gripped the lance in his hand and peered down at the road. Deep down

in him an understanding began to grow that was much nobler than his own passions.

* * *

The morning was just dawning. The fog that had blanketed the pass in the night was now being driven upwards. Half seen in the bush was a flock of chirping blackbirds which kept hopping merrily from twig to twig. The condensed vapour, which at first was like a pleasant fine rain, later thickened into an opaque mist and at last was gone with the wind. Down below the sun stealthily showed its face from behind the imposing mountain ranges and when its first crimson rays licked the pass, everything turned abruptly bright. A new day began.

After a night's march, the elephant brought Dik to the road leading down to his village. From a transport team coming from Takhan they had chanced to meet in the last campaign, Dik and the company command had heard the bad news about Takhan village and grandfather Rem. Dik was then given leave to go home for some days.

Lomluong became excited as it found the old trail and quickened its pace. Perched on its back Dik too felt an eagerness. His heart throbbed painfully at the sight of the familiar scenery. Still those familiar trees that lined the lane, still the dear old reeds whose gray swaying plumes were beckoning him to come. He shouted over his shoulder to Toan

to steady himself then struck the elephant on the head with the lance shaft, yelling:

"Forward! Forward, Lomluong!" Then his voice went soft as he breathlessly urged it on: "I'll give you an armful of sugar cane when we reach the village, Lomluong. That's a promise."

The elephant threw its forelegs violently forward, assuming a springing gait and then broke into a gallop down the road, literally lifting his gigantic body off the ground. What a run and how the wind whistled in their ears! The distance shrank rapidly. In his mind's eye, Dik could already see the scene that would greet him there. The precipitate thuds of Lomluong's onrush would bring the villagers dashing out to welcome him. He would order the elephant to stop abruptly and that would, of cause, raise a cloud of dust. Then before they could say a word he would jump recklessly down, not even waiting for Lomluong to kneel, and give each of them a hug although the people here hadn't quite got used to that kind of demonstration. Then he certainly would find Old Pa and his little friend Srung in the crowd. He still hoped against hope that Old Rem too would be there waving to him. "How could you think so, you fool," he told himself. "Never will you see him again. Never. Don't torture yourself this way." At this he began to feel depressed.

The elephant ran past the village entrance. In the woods, the brook was still murmuring and the birds were still singing as they had been in the old days but there was an uneasy hush in the village.

Dik called out but he only heard the echo of his own voice answering him. Lomluong was now on the spot where the elephants of the village used to assemble but which now seemed completely deserted. The oppressive stillness made the elephant shiver with fear. It stopped to sniff at the familiar wooden stakes and unexpectedly gave out a yell which sounded lamentable and full of yearning... "Where are you, my fellow elephants? What has happened to all of you?" it seemed to cry.

Then from very far came a vague bellow. Dik pricked his ears in a kind of recognition. Could it be Lekdam's? "Go on yelling, oh go on yelling, Lomluong!" he urged his elephant, who obediently kept bellowing for some minutes. The other elephant answered bellow for bellow, but so tenuous and so distant was the reply Dik couldn't identify from what direction it came. "It's all right." — Dik told Toan. "The villagers have got the message. They will come."

He drove the elephant to his old home. The beast trod heavily on the long-abandoned lanes covered with wild grass, stumbled on half-burned logs and waded through the ashes of burned-down houses under which the charred earth had turned slippery, before it caught sight of the old house and broke into a trot.

The house stood lonely there among the ruins. Its presence contrasted grotesquely with the desolation which was too plainly the work of the enemy. Dik groaned in his spirit for the past days of peace.

"That's our house," Dik said to Toan. "I just don't understand why it's still intact while others have been destroyed. How my heart aches that my grandpa is gone!"

"Time will heal the wound, Dik. Everything will pass, you know," Toan said, trying to comfort Dik.

"No, you're wrong there. We Khas have a long memory." Dik replied, patting his forehead. "Even our children's children will never forget this!"

"I know your feelings, Dik, but let me tell you my story. My house too was burnt down and my father and my wife were killed in a French mopping up operation. My mother and the babies wept and wept for days while I was so grieved I was nearly out of my mind. But after that we calmed down and now everything is all right again. My children have grown up and are healthy and my old mother is all smiles again. For my part, I have joined the army since. In me there is no longer sadness, but only hatred — hatred for the enemy."

No sooner had Lomluong's back touched the floor of his pile house than Dik leaped onto it. Toan hurriedly followed him, not having time to chain the elephant to a pillar. The beast stooped to sniff at the familiar stairs made of ironwood then they could hear it moving about under the floor.

Dik stood still at the threshold. The door was shut tight and fastened carefully. His hands trembled as he undid the cord, then pushed the door open and went into the house. He looked around and saw that it was not in good repair. There were several cracks in the bamboo roof through which

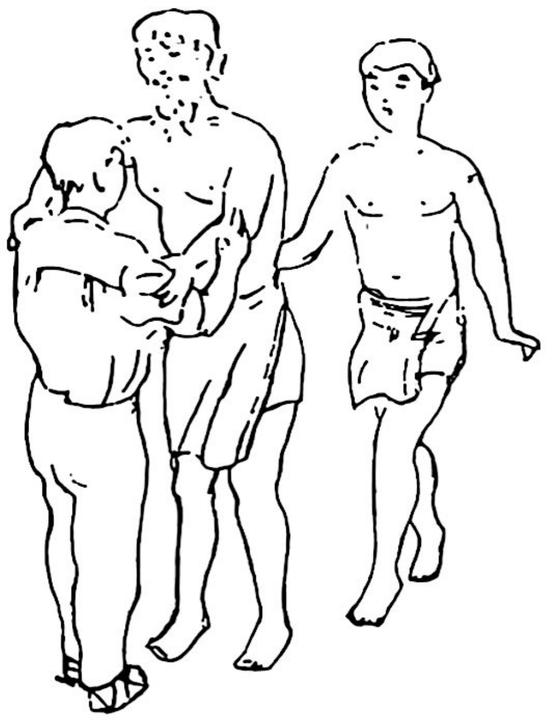
patches of blue sky could be seen. Right before him a big spider was busily at work, adding some more fine threads to its already dense web. Dik impatiently tore down the cobweb and proceeded to open the windows with a hand still covered with a cobble of clinging threads.

The morning light flooded in and in a moment the house brightened up. Everything was in order, which proved that Srung had recently been here. The scattered cold ashes in the fire-place had been swept into a tidy heap around which stood three seats, exactly in their old places. The old man's bed was still there in a corner. There seemed to be no change whatsoever. Everything looked exactly as it had been the day Dik went away. The only new things Dik could observe was the log close to the western window and a roll of cigarette paper stuck into the bamboo screen beside it. It must be the place where Old Rem had been in the habit of sitting to smoke his cigarette at sunset, gazing out at that bluish mountain in which he could imagine his grandson on his way to the front.

Everything reminded him of the old man and indeed for Dik his Grandpa seemed still to be here, in the house. "No, he isn't dead," Dik thought. "He is only absent from home for a while". But stark reality struck him as he looked at the cold, abandoned fire-place and the unused roll of cigarette paper. The realisation sent a shiver down his spine and he felt as though he were about to plunge headlong into an abyss. His head swam and he had to lean against the wall to steady himself.

Down in the yard, the elephant was still walking to and fro. Toan had slipped out without Dik's noticing it and was seated on the beast's head, directing it to push the logs that were lying in disorder in the yard into a neat heap. Then he drove Lomluong out to uproot the bushes around the house and fling them away. "Good old Lomluong!", Dik thought. "He will work under any circumstances" Lomluong's steady persistence brought peace to his mind. "That's it," he said to himself, still watching the rock-like placid bulk of the beast. "I should learn from him. Just go on working. That's the only right thing to do."

At that moment he distinctly heard an elephant bellow. Lomluong stopped its work and throwing its trunk upward roared out a reply. Lekdam had arrived carrying on its back Old Pa and Srung. The two had been living in a shanty house in the woods. The call-and-answer bellowing of the elephants had attracted



their attention and they guessed that Dik must be back home.

"Now, where's my Dik?" Old Pa at once asked, stepping hastily in, leaving the two elephants to fondle each other with their trunks.

The old man made for Dik and clutched his shoulders with his hands. Srung stood rigid behind Old Pa, staring in stupefaction at his old chum.

"How did you get here?" the old man asked, his voice shaking with anguish. "Do you see what has happened?"

Dik nodded silently.

He called his aide in and introduced him to Old Pa and Srung. He said something inaudible in a voice so husky and strange that Srung again looked at him questioningly. The old man led him by the hand to the fire-place where Srung had begun to make a fire. The flames consumed the loose, dry fibers of the logs and flared up into a merry blaze, bringing life back to the room and driving out and away that peculiar mouldy odour of an abandoned house. Dik took a good look at the old man and found that he was much aged and enfeebled. Like an old pillar that had turned shaky, he was now stoop-shouldered and dim of sight. Anxiety had worn grooves in his forehead. To him it seemed years since the day Dik had gone away from the village.

"There's no use lamenting, my boy," Old Pa said energetically. "We the old, must one day join our ancestors in the other world. If I had been Rem, I would have behaved exactly as he did."

Srung looked haggard and was so thin his shoulder blades showed under his torn shirt. But after all the trials he had undergone, there was something more mature, more composed, more determined about him. He told Dik, almost in a whisper, about the heroic end of Old Rem and about what had subsequently befallen Takhan village. Life had been extremely hard here with all this devastation — houses burnt down, elephants killed and rice consumed to the last grains...

"The village must be rebuilt," Dik cut in. "We must not migrate to another place. The enemy won't let you live in peace anywhere, anyway. It's here that we'll rebuild our houses, catch and tame new elephants, open up new clearings..."

"That's right," Srung said enthusiastically. "Hunger would be our fate if we moved away. There's practically no edible roots left in the forest now and if things keep going on this way we'll soon be forced to eat the seed-rice".

"Tell the guerillas to come back here, Srung," Dik suggested. "Turn the village into a fortified place with plenty of booby-traps and let's get ourselves ready. We'll fight them if the enemy troops dare to show their faces here. And when they withdraw we'll all come home."

Then turning to Old Pa, he asked:

"What's your opinion, Grandpa?"

The old man smiled and gently replied:

"I'm an old man now. It's up to you to decide. Yes, we should stick to the village and if need be,

defend it. To my knowledge, you'll not find any place more fertile than this!"

"Well, you heard it, Srung!" cried Dik. "The first thing to do now is to clear the ground and sow the seeds before it's too late in the season."

Srung nodded approval, laughing softly:

"I was in the wrong when I first thought that we would have to move away this time. Now it's perfectly clear that we'll stay right here and live on our own land and nobody shall deprive us again of our homes and our fields..."

Upon Dik's request, that same afternoon he and his aide were led to the Black Swamp where they paid their last tribute to Old Rem. After that, they paid a visit to the huts deep in the woods.

Their presence there caused quite a commotion. People came rushing out to meet them. Their eyes dimmed as they saw how, after only a year, Dik and his elephant had so completely changed. For them, this young mahout had undoubtedly grown up into manhood and Lomluong seemed more robust and every inch as dignified as any mature elephant.

The excitement was catching so that Dik forgot for a moment his grief. He pointed at Toan and said proudly:

"Meet my aide! He's a group leader."

The villagers had more than once met the army-men and had a guerrilla unit of their own and therefore knew what it meant to be a group leader. They cried admiringly:

"Oh, so young and already a group leader!"

"Greetings to you all, people of Takhan!" Toan hailed them.

"Greetings to you Dik's aide!"

"Welcome to Dik's mate!"

"You're a stranger, but you are one of us because you're Dik's aide," several of the elders shouted jovially.

When the excitement had subsided, Dik proposed that the people return to their old village and start an elephant hunt. As Dik still had some days' leave, he and Toan would willingly give them a hand.

A dozen guerrillas were sent without delay to scout and to dig for trap holes. They were back by midnight the following day with good news, which at once set the whole camp in motion. In the jungle huts people left their beds, lighted their candles, joked with one another while hurriedly completing their preparations. With only a few tamed elephants to join the hunt, this was by no means a big operation. And yet, it still helped the Takhan people to relive their past glorious days.

The elephants trumpeted for action and impatiently trampled about on the moist jungle ground. The young girls, who had just been roused from sleep and whose hair was tousled on account of the old taboo[1], were running about preparing food and drink for the hunters. The whole camp was

1. According to the taboo, on a hunting day, women are prohibited from combing their hair.

bustling with action. For everyone knew they were doing something to build their village again.

Of the three elephants which were to take part in the hunt, Lomluong was the most able-bodied as Lekdam was old and Old Pa's elephant was recovering from a wound it had received in the last attack of the enemy.

The Takhan hunters were fully aware of the risk they ran by sending only three elephants out against a whole herd of wild elephants but they were willing to take the challenge for their people's sake.

Old Pa would lead the hunt as always. Dik was amazed at the sudden change in the old man whom he had found so tired and feeble only the previous day. He looked younger, more alert and full of self confidence. He wore his best sarong, the one with a grey-and-blacksquare pattern he often used on such occasions. He was bare to the waist showing a crumpled skin speckled with dark pigmentations. He walked up to each elephant to ask the mahouts if they had fed their animals properly. His old eyes glistened with happiness and his body looked reddish brown in the candle light.

"Every mahout on his mount!" he shouted to Dik and Srung.

They ordered their elephants to go on their knees and swiftly climbed to their necks. Excitement surged through Toan as he squatted behind Dik on Lomluong's neck and he felt something strangely akin to that restlessness he had experienced when he first had his baptism of fire. He was duly armed

with a sharp pointed dagger and a flashing brass gong, which was slung over his shoulder. In his hand was a gong stick with a rounded head. Old Pa drove his elephant a few paces ahead then turned round to remind the hunters of the hunting laws they already knew so thoroughly: they shouldn't kill the animals that had been rounded up nor should they capture any baby elephant.[1]

"Look here, my boys!" the old man said.

"This hunt will be difficult — and dangerous, I must warn you — and will be quite different from those of yore when we had a whole herd of hunting elephants at our disposal. Are you willing to take the risk?",

"We are willing, Old Pa!", they replied together.

"That's good. Now let's go!"

The old man crouched and flourished his lance. His elephant whipped round and eagerly set off with the other two elephants following suit.

They reached the hunting ground at dawn the following morning. From where they stood, the hunters could see an endless trail of broken trees and trampled shrubs — the aftermath of the passing of wild elephants. The men urged their elephants to follow the same trail. It was late in the morning when they caught a glimpse of the wild herd.

They were grazing in a green clearing and only their backs, which looked like solid black rocks,

1. It takes many years to raise a baby elephant to working age and the enterprise is therefore not practical.

were to be seen through the tall grass. Some were playing mischievously in the meadow, trumpeting and now and then throwing an uprooted bush into the air.

Old Pa stopped his elephants, placed them in a line abreast and gestured them to move forward. Being thoroughly trained, the elephants made for the wild herd as softly as they could but the latter soon sensed danger.

One old female elephant[1] heaved out a highpitched warning that sounded full of rage and the others instantly trooped round her, forming a battle line. The female elephant then faced about and, staring furiously at the hunters, walked toward them. It was a head taller than the young elephants of the herd, and its skin was calloused and wizened. Close to its heels were male elephants with pointed tusks, then came the suckling babies and their mothers. And bringing up the rear were some other strong male elephants. They charged right in the direction of the domestic elephants, trying to clear a way into the forest. Once they could get there, they were free since the tamed elephants, with the drivers on their backs, could never catch up with them for the simple reason that their masters would be flung off by the branches if they made a reckless chase after the fleeing animals.

1. As male elephants are perpetually hunted for their tusks, they have become rarities. That's why in most cases, it is female ones that lead the herd.

The two hostile herds were heading for each other in silent fury. They lowered their heads threateningly, thrusting their tusks upwards.

Old Pa's elephant calmly walked on, guarded on either side by Lomluong and Lekdam. It had a heavy body, all brawn and muscles.

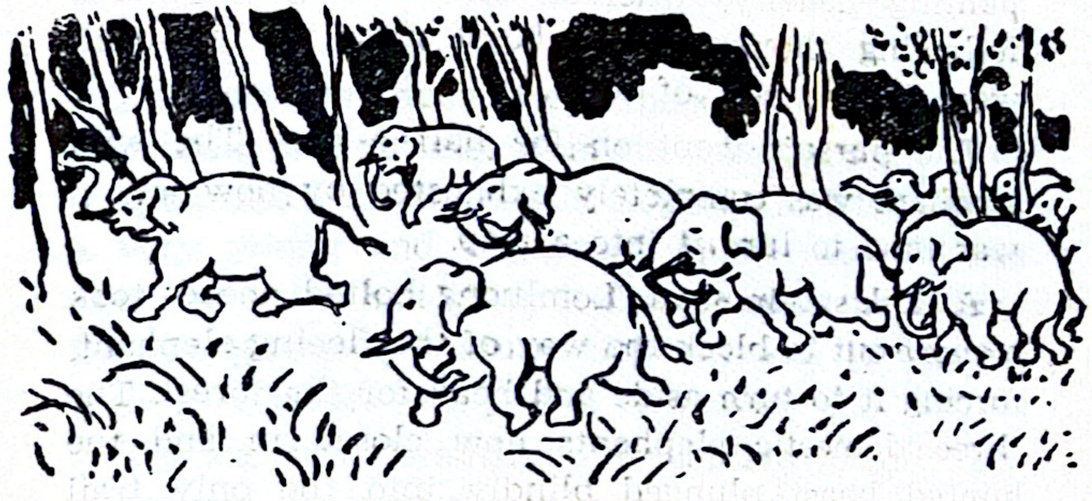
Evidently agitated by the whole atmosphere, Lekdam felt all of a sudden young and strong again and took care to keep a perfect marching line with its two mates. It proceeded with short, brisk steps, curling its trunk up, ready to dodge the wild elephants' onslaught and to lash back.

The distance between the two herds was rapidly narrowing. They were now only a few paces away from each other. They slowed down. The atmosphere became unbearably tense. It was the old female elephant that broke the silence. Rolling back its trunk it trumpeted fiercely a signal for the whole wild herd to plunge headlong at the domestic elephants.

Old Pa snapped out an order and his elephant deftly stepped aside throwing up its trunk to shield its master. The old female elephant lashed out with its trunk but failed to hit its target. The hunting elephants then made way for the furious males which stampeded past them into the woods.

"Beat the gongs! Quick!" Old Pa shouted.

The clearing in a moment turned into a battlefield with men shouting, elephants bellowing and stamping and the cracking of felled trees and trampled undergrowth.



Trunks swished and lashed and whipped savagely, tossing up into the air a cloud of leaves. In this storm of fallen leaves, the mahouts steadied themselves on the elephants' necks and struck the gongs with all their might. The deafening sound scared off the wild elephants which were trying to make a comeback to rescue those which had been rounded up. These were now in an utter confusion. The leader of the herd was then forced to lead the male elephants back into the forest, whining and moaning all the way.

The hunting elephants were now pursuing one young and strong male elephant nearing working age. The beast, whose tusks were already several feet long and whose hide looked smooth and sleek, was driven into an area overgrown with tall reeds with old Pa's elephant close on its heels.

The hunted calf, which was crashing a way through the dense reeds, quickly tired and began

panting heavily, whereas the hunting elephants, following the retreating beast close on its trail, were in the best of form.

The pursuit went on for half a day. The wild elephant was completely exhausted by now and it was time to lure it into a trap.

At Dik's command, Lomluong bolted ahead, took a short-cut to block the way of the fleeing elephant, forcing it to turn aside and head for the forest. The three domestic elephants now closed in and the hunted beast plunged blindly into the only trail left into the forest. Old Pa again gave the order to sound the gongs. Frightened out of its wits, the wild elephant dashed frantically along the trail. Old Pa waited for some time before he signalled to the mahouts to cease their gong-beating. Then mopping his brow with his hand he stopped his elephant. Dik and the other mahout followed suit. The wild elephant kept careering madly on into the forest until a tremendous crash was heard, followed by silence.

The old man smiled contentedly and glanced at the mahouts and their aides. At last he said softly: "Good!"

Dik walked Lomluong to the pit into which the wild elephant had fallen. The animal was struggling in the narrow and deep hole, trumpeting in despair.

Old Pa's elephant and Lekdam lowered their trunks into the pit and waved them over the captured animal's head for a sniff, while Lomluong kneeled down and comfortingly patted the young elephant on the head with its trunk. They emitted

husky and soothing grunts to console their new friend.

The scene reminded Dik of the stormy night when Lomluong had got lost from the wild herd and had strayed into his village. His elephant had then been a very young and frightened animal and it was Lekdam which had given it the consoling pats. Now Lomluong was a mature elephant and it was its turn to comfort the young newcomer.

"Oh Pa, how beautiful our captive looks!" Dik exclaimed rapturously. "As beautiful as my own Lomluong when we captured him."

The old man laughed:

"Well, we've got an extra hand for the reconstruction of our village. If things go smoothly. I'm sure it won't be long before our herd will be replenished. Only it's sad to think of our murdered elephants, my boys!"

"What shall it be called, Grandpa?"

"Let me think... oh, no, let Dik name it," the old man said, looking expectantly at Dik.

"It must be a good name, too!" Srung jovially joined the talk. "As good as Dik's Lomluong!"

Now that the tumult had died down, Dik's mind was at peace again. He seemed to hear with sudden clarity Toan's words "... and now everything is all right again. My children have grown up and are healthy..." Yes, nothing could hinder the evolution of life — let alone destroy it. Time would heal the wounds and all sorrows would pass.

Dik could see in his mind's eye the people of Takhan returning to their old place. A new and lively village would be built under the big trees where peace would reign. And there would be a big herd of working elephants, a vigorous growth of sugar cane and banana trees...

Dik turned to Toan, saying:

"I would name it Saysana, which in Lao means Victory. The elephant will overcome all difficulties and will take part in the reconstruction of our Takhan village."

Toan nodded approval:

"Good! Saysana will surely overcome all difficulties and will take its part in the reconstruction!"

Old Pa and Srung also agreed:

"A good name — Saysana! It will remind the villagers of you, Dik and Toan!"

The trapped animal was still very strong and furious now. But without food and drink it would be weak and manageable after some days and only then would it be taken out of the pit and back to the village to be tamed. The mahouts felled some trees and fenced in the pit, a fence solid enough to discourage any rescue attempts by the other wild elephants.

When the work was done, Old Pa gave it a last inspection, scrutinizing every log with that severe look of his before he gave the mahouts the order to mount. The three elephants walked leisurely home,

carrying on their backs their exhausted but jubilant masters.

* * *

Dik left the village the following day. Old Pa and Srung conducted him and his aide a long way on their road. Toan rode on Lomluong's back a few paces ahead leaving the three Kha to themselves for a while. They walked slowly, trying to delay the time they were to part.

Dik and Srung were engaged in low conversation, promising to write to each other and to inform each other of their plans and hopes. Old Pa sauntered along silently. He was thinking of something more important.

Never had he felt so close to young Dik. Now that Old Rem was no more, he felt urged to take care of Dik in his stead. "I'll find him a loving and loyal wife. He's good-looking and the villagers love him, they won't refuse if I act as a go-between."

He had often tried to detect in Dik any particular affection during his stay at the village. He had always said to himself every time he went with Dik to this or that house where there was a young girl: "Well, I'll be damned if Dik isn't falling in love with this or that pretty lass!" But he had always been mistaken, for although Dik greeted them merrily and talked with animation about what they were going to do, he hadn't set his eye on any one of them in particular. More often than not, he

would stop dead during the talk thinking of his dead grandpa, the cosy atmosphere of a home having reminded him of his own lost home. That abstracted meditation of his couldn't escape the old man's observation who grieved for Dik's acute loneliness.

"Why doesn't he fall in love with one of the girls ?" he mused helplessly, then he would argue mentally with Dik: "You should get married, Dik! Your wife will be a comfort to you and a link with your village, my boy. Life would be much easier for you then."

For long he had waited for a good opportunity to persuade Dik to think of marrying. Now he took the two young men by the arms, told them to sit down on a big boulder at the roadside and said with a solemn air:

"I wish to talk to you, Dik. Perhaps you've heard that Srung is going to marry, which is good for him. But what about you ? You're old enough for that too. Grandfather Rem would be glad if I took his place now and arranged for you to marry some good girl."

Dik was completely taken aback at such a suggestion. He turned bright red in the face.

"You mean me, Grandpa ?" he muttered.

"Yes. You, of course," the old man replied, patting his back. "Just tell me the girl you prefer and don't bother your head any more about it."

"Oh, no ! I don't want to marry yet. I'm still too young, grandpa !" Dik protested.

"Too young !" the old man cried, surprised. He went on !

"Who told you so, Dik ? In my time, people got married when they were 15 or so — a lot younger than you are now, my boy".

Dik laughed in embarrassment:

"But it's quite different now. I've joined the army and an armyman doesn't marry young, Grandpa !"

Don't you see that the population of Ta Khan have been greatly reduced after the killings ?" Old Pa sighed. After a pause he continued: "I sometimes wonder if you love your grandpa at all. Let me tell you what Old Rem confided to me when you were away, Dik. 'My only wish', so he said 'was to have Dik settling down to found a family. I can't bear the loneliness whenever I come home. But do you think he'll please me by complying with my desire, or will he, like a bird in the jungle, fly away never to return ? I would willingly let him go again once he has married the girl he chooses. He's young and I am not so foolish as to try to tie him down, you know.' I felt so perplexed I didn't know how to answer him. Well, that's all there's to it. If you do love your grandpa, you should yield to his wish, Dik."

"That's right, Dik." Srung volunteered his help. "Just tell us the girl of your heart. We the young are supposed to accomplish everything the people have entrusted to us: to fight against the enemy in defence of our village, to get married in due time and to have children of our own... Old Pa

has told the truth: there are so few people left in our village! We should marry and have children if we don't want to face a shortage of manpower in the future."

Dik was very moved by the old man's fatherly words. Never before had he felt so palpably the link that united him to his people, to the village where he was born and grew up.

"Old Pa is right," he told himself. "But I have to consult Toan and Thang first. They will tell me what to do."

He lovingly took the old man's snarled hand in his and spoke with hesitation.

"Believe me Grandpa when I say that I wish I could obey you. But I'm an armyman now and as such, I'll always be away from home. That's the reason why I think I shouldn't marry now."

"Don't worry," the old man eagerly cut in "I'll consult your commanders about the matter. They know us Ta Khai people, and will certainly agree with us."

Then he methodically went through a list of eligible young girls. Dik flushed and shook his head:

"I'm sorry I'm not in love with any of them yet. But I promise to you I'll make up my mind the next time I come home."

Dik helped Old Pa to his feet and said apologetically:

"I must be going now. Look how the elephant has outstripped us, Grandpa!"

Though far from contented, Old Pa had to restrain himself. He said grudgingly:

"If that's how you want it to be, so be it. But I'll see to it that you'll be married for sure the next time you're back. And what's more, it'll be a fine big wedding, too. Now, good bye, my boy!"

The men of the group in charge of the war booty were trying to catch up with their unit. They followed the signs marking the route made of sharpened stakes of bamboo. A three-man team was sent ahead to clear the way, and each time they passed a sign the first man of the team was to pull it off the trees.

Everyone of the group was carrying a heavy load on his shoulders and the howdah was filled with arms and ammunition. After many campaigns and battles the sides of the howdah were now covered with carved stars.

Toan didn't take his usual seat on Lomluong's neck but walked alongside the animal. The load on its back was already too heavy and he didn't want to burden it with his own weight.

They stopped at a bend in the trail. The scouts looked for the signals but there were none. A strong gust of wind or a passing herd of wild beasts had perhaps carried them off and away.

Dik drove Lomluong to the stopping place. Which way were they to take now? Even the elephant was

of little use. Its sharp instinct became confused as there were footprints on every trail and the army-men's scent was everywhere.

At last, the group decided to take a trail, which led in the direction from which they had come. It looked exactly like the other trails they had so often followed. Still those trees that crowded along the trail. Still the tangled undergrowth. Still those smooth high cliffs. But without the signal marks, there was now something mysterious and threatening in the trail. What was lying in wait for them, behind those silent bushes and boulders ?

The column marched in silence with the scouts a good way ahead of them. Suddenly a burst of machine-gun fire stuttered in front of them. The enemy must have set an ambush on the further bank of a roaring torrent and aware of their approach had opened fire in their direction. They sought cover behind the rocks and hastily retreated. The column trotted stealthily into the jungle and slipped upstream, only to find that the trail there was also blocked by enemy soldiers, who had been deployed all along the river, evidently to bar the group's withdrawal.

Looking backwards over their shoulders, the men now saw huge columns of flames and smoke rising up from the jungle. The reports of gunfire grew louder as the enemy drew nearer. The only direction from which there seemed to be no firing was bounded by the side of a high mountain with steep, forbidding cliffs.

It was evident that the group was completely surrounded. There was no alternative but to put up a fight and try to hold out till dusk when darkness might provide cover for a breakthrough.

Toan told Dik to hide his elephant, then concentrated on the disposal of his men for the coming battle. Now he was no longer Dik's aide but the commander of the group and his orders must be obeyed. Dik and other transporters unloaded Lomluong and each armed himself with a rifle and a quantity of hand grenades. The rest of the ammunition and guns were hidden in the crevices of the rocks and Lomluong was led to a place where it could lie down, protected by large blocks of rock.

When Dik and the transport men returned to Toan the fight was beginning. They were by far outnumbered by the enemy. The ten or so of them had to confront imposing forces closing in from three directions.

Dik lay behind a big boulder pointing his rifle to where the enemy would advance. Though this was his baptism of fire, he felt extraordinary calm. Maybe this was due to the presence of his comrades — who would live or die with him. He paid no heed to the bullets that wailed overhead and concentrated on the one thing that seemed of utmost importance to him now: to avenge the death of Old Rem, of his friends, of the elephants, to avenge his destroyed village...

A mortar shell came whizzing down and exploded near their position, sending up a column of earth and smoke. Then a regular barrage of mortar shells

rained down. The tall trees with their heavy green tops which form the roof of the jungle rocked and swayed dangerously under the impact. All of a sudden it seemed as if hell had broken loose. Dik could hear all around the tremendous crashes of split branches and falling trees through the deafening roar of exploding shells. The dense smoke that veiled the scene had reduced visibility to a few metres.

Then came the moment for the enemy planes. They dived and dived again, releasing their bombs. The ground shook violently and the explosion were deafening. The bombers then kept circling the spot for a while before coming in for the final kill with their napalm bombs. Balls of fire were seen flying in all directions. But the red hot jelly could only singe the trees which stubbornly refused to catch fire though their sap hissed and sputtered under the broken bark, they still stood firm and erect. So did the men of the transport group. They quickly covered themselves with their blankets when the bombs burst, and when these caught fire, cast them off. They stayed right where they were, waiting for the enemy infantrymen.

At last came the French shock troops, blasting their way forward with their submachine guns. They shouted to each other as they advanced and were cunning enough to keep under cover behind the half-burnt trees. A tall figure loomed up before Dik's rifle sights. Blood rushed to his head as he saw this perfect opportunity for vengeance. He let the French soldier come closer, so near he could see his

red distorted face in which glittered a pair of nervous blue eyes. The soldier kept firing at random into the bushes around Dik, unaware of his imminent danger. Dik gritted his teeth "I'll kill you like a wild beast, you bandit! You'll fall down on your face never to rise again."

He slowly pulled the trigger. There was a shocked look on the enemy's face, which increased its distorted appearance. He let go of his submachine gun, swayed from side to side, his glassy eyes staring sightlessly, then crashed heavily down. The steel helmet he was wearing struck against the foot of a tree with a short, hollow sound. Another soldier appeared. Dik again pulled the trigger. He fell like a log.

Not one among Toan's men lost his nerve during the enemy's assault. They fired with deadly accuracy at the attackers from behind their well-concealed positions. At last the enemy having suffered heavy casualties had to stop short their attack and retreat in disorder.

After a while, they organized a second attack against the transport men. Their artillery pounded the position continuously while their planes savagely bombed and strafed the area. Again the earth quaked and reeled. The transporters' clothing was blackened and torn to shreds, their faces were black with the smoke from their own firing.

After the softening-up mortar fire, the enemy again showed their faces. Those in the front line, with their jungle knives slung over their shoulders and their submachine guns pressed to their sides,

were cautiously advancing, spraying bullets before them all the way. The transporters' rifles at once replied and more enemy soldiers went down.

Now and then a hand grenade was tossed into the assailants' ranks and wrought terrible havoc, each time sending the enemy into hasty retreat.

It was now late in the afternoon but the fighting still raged on. Light had faded on the high mountain peaks as the sun sank down. The sky was a deep blue. Remaining in their positions, the transporters felt their hearts fill with hope. What they must do now was to try to hold their ground for a few more hours and wait for the dark to settle. They would then muster their strength and stage a break-through.

But the trick was not unfamiliar to the enemy who, by experience, well knew that if they couldn't overwhelm their enemy before nightfall the latter would simply vanish. For this reason they hastily organized a final wave of attack.

The temporary hush was shattered as the French again opened fire and their infantry rushed forwards wave upon wave. It was a vain effort. The transporters' cool marksmanship again terrified the enemy out of their wits as they saw with their own eyes how the bullets of the invisible guerillas felled their mates to the ground.

A cluster of hand grenades exploded and the enemy scuttled back: Once again their attack had been beaten off.

The guerillas were all exhausted, hungry and thirsty and their ammunition reserve was nearly finished. It was doubtful if they could have held out if the attack had not stopped there.

To their relief, the sun chose that moment to disappear behind the mountain range and in the sky a few timid stars began to appear.

* * *

"It was nearly dark and the smoke had cleared away." Toan was relating the whole battle to the comrades. "The mountain range was now a huge black wall silhouetted against the starry sky. I gave the order to retreat. The wounded were the first to be carried away. I put some cartridges beside the fires left burning by the enemy's napalm, which I reckoned would explode one by one and make the enemy think that we were still there preparing ourselves for their next onslaught.

"Then one by one we withdrew from the scene and I was the last to leave.

"Suddenly I heard some shots from the direction of the enemy. I stood up and fired a whole clip in their direction before running away. Their answer was of course terrific.

"As I ran I caught sight of a man who was trailing something heavy among the fallen trees, heading for the enemy's camp. At first, I thought it was a guerilla who had come back to look for me but a

second look told me I was mistaken. It was Dik and that heavy "something" proved to be a hand grenade case.

"I shouted at him as loud as I could but he didn't stop. Maybe my call was drowned in the gunfire, maybe Dik's hearing had got so dull he just didn't hear me, for he kept dashing forward at the double. I turned back and was about to run after him when something hit me violently on the head. I fell down and lost consciousness.

"I came to with a blast of warm air blowing onto my face. At first I didn't know where I was and why I found myseif there. My mind was too hazy. But it was not long before my memory flashed back. I was lying on my stomach and was pressed down by something very heavy that prevented me from making any move.

"The vertebrae of my backbone seemed to go suddenly loose and my whole body ached like hell. I tried to feel the thing that held me down and found that it was the bough of a tree. A splinter from a burst mortar shell must have split the tree and one of its branches struck my head as it crashed down... Then I fainted again. The same gust of warm air roused me for the second time. I strained my eyes and saw a huge black shape standing by my side. The shape moved and again I felt that warm blast. I was so happy I nearly yelled with laughter : it was Lomluong.

"The elephant waited for some time then walked away. Trying to stifle a moan, I called out feebly : 'Lomluong !'

"Lomluong immediately turned back. I softly called him again and you can guess how glad he was when he saw that I was still alive. He moved around trying to find a way to get me on my feet. After some futile attempts to remove the bough with his trunk, the clever beast knelt down and pushed it slowly off me with his head. I was scared stiff thinking my end was near because my skin would surely peel off under the friction. But (oh how clever) ! Lomluong only gave the bough a gentle shove just enough to slip his trunk underneath and lift it off and away. Still I couldn't get up, feeling so wretchedly limp. Again the clever elephant came to my rescue. He went down on his knees, gently wrapped his trunk round me and put me up on his neck. I clung to his coarse hide and at once went into another faint. I hadn't time to think of the outcome of the battle, of our retreat, of the group or even of Dik, although I should have wondered, as I later scolded myself, what Lomluong was doing without his master.

"In this stupor, I had the feeling that Lomluong was carefully stepping over all those uprooted trees and broken boughs that lay in confusion all over the jungle. Sometimes I opened my eyes and saw some pools of water shining in the starry light. So this was what the enemy had achieved with their bombs and artillery fire — They had turned the jungle into an open stretch of desolation. I became wide awake when a shower of cold water poured on my face. No. Not a shower of rain. Only one of Lomluong's tricks : he was sprinkling me with his

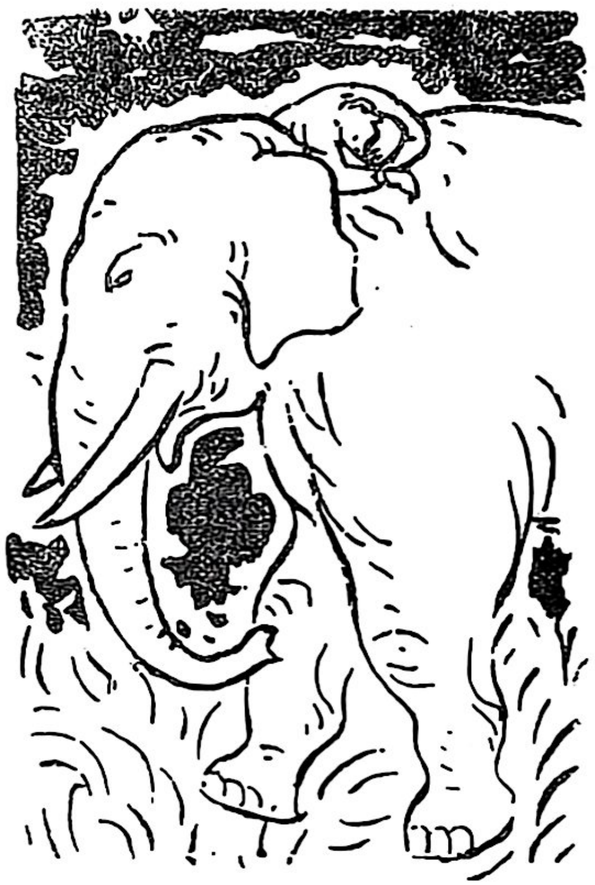
trunk. In the dim light I realized that Lomluong had brought me back to the place where we had entrenched in the afternoon. I looked round and saw a figure sprawled in a deep crater. Some instinct told me that it must be Dik and I felt then so alarmed I had to clutch at the rattan rope fastened around Lomluong's chest to stop myself from falling down. 'Oh Dik! Are you alive?'...

"Unexpectedly Lomluong wailed out and the sound filled the jungle which was otherwise at the time wrapped in total silence. Then a hail of bullets came whistling by but fortunately no one was hit. The elephant instantly stopped his yelling as if he recognised his mistake. But he kept patting me lightly with his trunk to rouse me up.

'Khuk khau!', I said softly.

"Lomluong knelt down. He did this with infinite care, still pressing his trunk against my body to keep me on his neck. I alighted and crawled with difficulty to Dik's side. He must be badly wounded for there was blood all over his body and one of his arms was shattered. I peered into the empty hand grenade case and conjured up visions of his confrontation with the enemy. Some battle I should say. And one against so many, too. Without his heroic stand, no one could guess what might have happened to the retreating group with all those ferocious French soldiers hot on their heels. He must have fought to his last hand grenade, killing quite a few of them — of that I felt sure for I saw lying round about several crushed helmets that hadn't

been there in the affternoon. Something had definitely crumpled them up. And here he was now, our dear Dik, in such a helpless state.



"I hastily put my hand over his nose but to my distress couldn't detect any breathing. Just imagine my despair... Dik finished, done for. I stroked his face, slowly and wearily, with my hand, moaning to myself. Lomluong stood in silence for some time then impatiently stopped my hand with his trunk and I swear that there was a deep frown on his face. He was displeased all right, but about what? I wondered (Only later on did I realise that it was my slowness that got on his nerves. He wanted me to remove his master from this dangerous place without delay). Then I seemed to feel something like a tremor on Dik's face and applying my ear

to his chest I thought I could hear some faint heartbeats. Yes, his heart was throbbing weakly but unmistakably. So he was not dead. He was still alive, dear old Dik. I must have got very excited then because I just didn't know what to do. And only when the impatient Lomluong again urged me to action giving me a push with his trunk did I fish out a coil of parachute cord and proceed to fasten Dik to my back with it. Then I signaled to the elephant to help us on to his back and off we went.

"It was a long and weary march for Lomluong as there were many obstacles. The intelligent animal was mindful of the two wounded men on his back and went to great trouble to avoid shock of any kind by any careless or sudden movement. For my part, I became completely limp after so much exertion and relapsed into half consciousness. Somewhere some owl hooted. Then I heard water murmuring. Then only Lomluong's panting... The jungle was wrapped in perfect stillness and nobody could imagine that only a few hours ago a bloody battle had been fought in this area.

"Lomluong walked on and on towards I couldn't tell where and I really didn't care till we ran into you, comrades..."

A group had been sent back in search of Dik and Toan. The men returned to the battle scene but had been unable to find them.

As the enemy troops were still there, they had not dared to shout and had to divide into small groups, fan out and seek for Dik and Toan in all directions. They met Lomluong, which had been

guided by its keen instinct all the way to the base in the heart of the jungle, shunning the enemy's ambush pockets. The armymen brought Dik and his aid down, laid them on stretchers and carried them away, Lomluong of course following.

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"Khuk Khau! Khuk Khau!" Toan snapped. But Lomluong ignored his order and did not kneel down for him to load up.

This was the first time in years Lomluong had disobeyed an order. It stiffened and stood still with tail between the hindlegs. Its enormous ears hung lifelessly and its eyes, which used to be so sharp, now had a vacant look. It stood there as motionless as a rock.

"Khuk Khau! Khuk Khau!" Toan insisted.

Still the elephant turned a deaf ear to his command. His unit was preparing to start and Lomluong's disobeyance infuriated Toan.

"Khuk Khau! Khuk Khau!" he barked sharply

Lomluong showed no sign of hearing him. Toan grasped the rattan cord and heaved himself up onto the animal's back. Then with a swift movement he snatched the lance and lashed out sternly.

"Khuk Khau!"

Still no move. The elephant stubbornly refused to budge. Toan might as well have been shouting at a dead elephant. Toan raised the lance aiming its

pointed steel head at Lomluong's neck and frowned. But suddenly he heaved a sigh and gave up the attempt.

No. He couldn't find it in his heart to deal with Lomluong so harshly. The loyal elephant didn't deserve such punishment.

Toan had noticed for some time that yearning look in Lomluong's eyes as it gazed at the trail on which the stretcher bearers had taken its master away. The elephant must have been missing its master badly since it loved him so. Without Dik, it had become listless and seemed to care for nobody else. It shuffled about restlessly and sometimes pulled moodily at the chain. And when it found the day passed bringing no Dik it cried out mournfully in the evening.

Lomluong had refused its feed the night before. It ignored the enormous heap of sweet grass people had anxiously brought for it. Now and then it let out a wail. When the armymen unchained Lomluong it rushed out and went galloping down the trail along which Dik had been carried away. It had taken Toan a lot of time and effort to get him back.

The fast had reduced Lomluong's weight to an alarming degree. It was now a shadow of its former self. Its bones stuck out and its hide looked loose like that of an old elephant. It stood all day in one place motionless and mournful. A grey, rough, lifeless mass.

"Khuk Khau, o, Khuk Khau, Lomluong!"

Again Toan coaxed the elephant to go down on his knees in an anxious and imploring voice. Apparently touched by the persuasiveness of his tone, Lomluong curled its trunk and gave him a sniff. But still it would not kneel down.

Toan left the elephant and went off to the company H.Q. He felt baffled and ashamed of his powerlessness. He had lived so long with this elephant, had known its moods and had by himself managed it so many times on difficult and hazardous journeys only now to find he couldn't do anything about this sudden obstinacy. Supposing the beast believed that its master was dead how could he, Toan, convince it that this was not so, that Dik was only seriously wounded and that he would get back some day?

He looked at his superiors in embarrassed silence, stroking his lance.

"Lomluong won't allow us to load up," he reported.

"But why?" someone asked.

"He ignores my orders. I suppose he must be missing Dik," Toan replied.

"And what about the goad?" another man queried.

Toan slowly tucked the lance in his belt and shook his head:

"For an elephant like Lomluong, I would never use the goad!"

"Just try!"

"No!" Toan said with finality. "There are things you should never try to do!"

The company commander, who cared for the elephant more than anyone else, tactfully intervened:

"Shall we leave him here for some days, just to let him calm down?"

"It's no use, comrade," Toan protested. "An elephant wouldn't easily forget that."

So a meeting was held to decide the fate of Lomluong. A queer kind of meeting, somebody later recalled, of the sort one only participates in once in a lifetime in the army. The question on the agenda was whether Lomluong should be left behind to wait for mahout Dik or whether it should be forced in one way or another to follow the company. Many of the men held that Lomluong's heroism and loyalty should be highly appreciated and it should therefore be treated with sympathy. It should, they urged, be left behind to wait for its master. But a number of others supported the other solution. "We too know Lomluong's worth and are devoted to him," they reasoned. "But we don't consider it a correct and revolutionary decision to let our men carry on their backs tons of ammunition and hardware just because of the whim of an elephant."

The company commander and the political commissar said nothing but they had made up their minds. In spite of their love for Dik and his elephant they still thought that to bring Lomluong along would be the right thing. And that once it could

overcome its grief, Lomluong would again be indispensable to the company in negotiating otherwise impassable trails through the jungle.

After a long and heated argument, the meeting came to the conclusion that they should oblige Lomluong to march with the unit to its destination — by all means.

Some scouts were later dispatched to a nearby Lao village to ask for a mahout. He was an elderly man who had once joined the Lao Itsala to fight the French invaders but was now demobbed due to a severe wound he had suffered in action. Seeing the quandary his Vietnamese friends were in, the good veteran took his lance and volunteered his help.

At first, Lomluong took no notice of the new mahout's orders. More than that, it made it clear that it would resist any further attempts to subdue it.

The mahout was most surprised when he failed to find the traditional wounds behind the elephant's ears. But he didn't lose heart and took the greatest care of the animal.

He succeeded in persuading it to eat its fill and talked persuasively to it. Now and then he even treated Lomluong to a song — the one Dik and Old Rem had so often sung to him in the old days — in a voice laden with tenderness and encouragement.

Lomluong gave in at last. But it was not as docile as it had been before and often made a mess of everything. It even reverted to some of its wild

behaviour, trumpeting furiously, stamping its feet and flourishing its trunk threateningly at the men.

One day, the mahout spoke to Toan :

"You know, Lomluong has grown pretty unruly of late I'm only a strange mahout. But in my opinion we should make the wounds behind his ears if we wish him to be managable".

Toan disagreed with the old man's reasoning. His affection for the animal was inextricably linked to his love for Dik. He was Dik's aide and he was responsible for Lomluong's welfare. If Dik hadn't done that kind of thing to Lomluong then neither would he.

"Oh uncle, I hope you won't treat Lomluong that way. Lomluong was accustomed to being looked upon as a friend by our mahout Dik". Toan entreated. "Let's be a little more patient with the elephant and he will learn again to behave himself !"

Considerate of the man's feelings towards the animal, the mahout let it pass. But when several months had gone by and Lomluong still refused to mend its ways, and on many occasions bolted away shaking everything — drivers and packages together — off its back, the mahout saw it was time to choose the lesser evil.

All Lomluong's four feet were firmly fettered and a big fire was made among the trees into which the mahout threw a sharpened iron rod. He waited till it was glowing red before he covered the obtuse end with a thick layer of fresh leaves to pull it out, then he came towards the elephant.

The armymen turned their heads away. They couldn't bear to witness Lomluong's agony. They heard from far off the elephant's painful roaring and the rattling of the chains as it tore at them.

* * *

After the operation, Lomluong became a submissive adjunct to the Truong Son company. Days and months went by and the Resistance still drew out. By this time the company had developed into a battalion.

The elephant had been faithfully performing the task of a beast of burden, but it could not put its heart into its work as in days gone by. Now it easily lost patience. Without its master it seemed to have aged beyond its years and to have become dull. Apart from its work, which it still performed with characteristic courage and perseverance, it seemed to feel no interest in anything. It had been present at many a big battle and was more than once wounded. But thanks to its capacity for quick recovery it had always been up and about again in a few days.

One man had always shown Lomluong special attention. This was Thang, now a battalion deputy commander. He was a frequent visitor to the mahout's shanty, particularly in the rest times between battles. It only took the new recruits a day or two to know all there was to know about Lomluong ; its fame and merits were well known in the

battalion. They also knew and recognised the special affection between the elephant and their deputy commander, whose visits were like those of a friend. On such occasions, Thang would undo a bundle of maize stalks and feed them to Lomluong, one by one. Sometimes he went out and brought back a bucketful of salted water for Lomluong to drink. Now and then he even walked him out for a bath. And Lomluong was always glad to see Thang, for he seemed to remind the elephant of its master. It would sometimes even playfully spray him — not to give him a wetting but only in a fine mist — to hear him shriek with delight. Time went by and there were many changes in Thang's unit but his love for the intelligent elephant remained steadfastly the same.

Thang always rushed to Lomluong's side everytime he got news that it had been wounded. And together with the mahout and his aide, he would wash the wound and staunch the bleeding with some medicinal herbs. Together with Lomluong's attendants, he would inspect the animal's feet before each engagement, or help them secure the howdah traps and to load Lomluong for a journey.

He would stand by the roadside watching his elephant go to war then strain his ears for its receding trumpeting and heavy tramp, after the beast had been lost to view. He never had any doubts that his elephant would carry out its duties faithfully and would come back covered with glory.

Half a year after the engagement in which he had been wounded, Dik was dismissed from hospital. He was in the best of form now but had lost one arm. About this time, Lomluong seemed to have taken a turn for the better and was almost like his former self — good-tempered, wise, and respectful to the mahout's orders. The old man had decided to heal the wounds behind its ears. He started applying daily dressings of medicinal leaves.

Lomluong could detect Dik's scent from a long way off. It trumpeted wildly, stood up on its hindlegs and tried in vain to shake off the fetters to make a dash to meet him.

When Dik came running to him, Lomluong lovingly put its trunk on his shoulder, its eyes shining with joy.

Toan and the old mahout came at a run towards Dik when they saw him. Toan flung his arms around Dik and hugged him close.

"Meet mahout Dik, uncle!" Toan turned his head over his shoulder shouting to the old man. "Oh, my *xieu*[1] you have come back at last."

Then still clutching his shoulders Toan gently pushed Dik backward to look at his face rapturously.

"Well, we can't help it, can we?", he said haltingly when he discovered the empty sleeve hanging by Dik's side. Then he added seriously: "It's a

1. Sworn brother, term used when addressing a very close friend.

miracle you're still alive with that kind of wound, you know."

As if jealous of Toan's human friendship with Dik, Lomluong gently pulled him aside then wrapping its trunk round Dik it lifted him up onto its neck.

Dik was painfully surprised when he saw the wounds behind Lomluong's ears. He put out his hand and took off the dressing of leaves for a look. The wounds were nearly healed. They would no longer hurt the animal any more, he could see, but still tears welled up in his eyes. The old mahout watched the effect of this discovery in Dik's face and was on the point of explaining matters when Dik ordered Lomluong to kneel down. He alighted and walked towards the old man, lowering his head in an attempt to hide the tears on his cheeks.

"How much did you have to hurt him, uncle?" he asked calmly.

Then he looked at the old man with eyes full of reproach: "How could you do that to Lomluong? We always treated him like a human being!"

The old mahout was fully aware of Dik's accusing look and simply stood still, perplexed. After a moment he returned the lance to Dik and silently hugged him tight in his strong arms. The gesture was fatherly but his voice, when he spoke to Dik, was solemn:

"You should understand me, *phuon*[1]. The elephant had become so wicked and I was but a strange

1. Friend. A common address between people of the same rank.

mahout. It ignored our orders because it missed you so badly, *phuon*! But it has lately become more docile and as you see I'm healing the wounds. Your elephant will be all right in a few days' time, *phuon*!"

Toan felt that he too was to blame. He squeezed Dik's remaining hand and said apologetically:

"Forget about it, Dik. We didn't want to do it. But Lomluong always rebelled and there was so much work to be done. Don't be sad, mate. The wounds are healing fine now, as you can see."

People were rushing to the place from all quarters and crowded around Dik, cheering merrily. Deputy commander Thang had to push them back shouting:

"Hey, now, you must let Dik have enough air to breathe? Come with me to headquarters, Dik. We've just got some very good tea!"

Dik unchained Lomluong and the two made their way, though not without difficulty, through the cheering mob to the H.Q.

When the commotion had subsided, Dik presented his papers to the commander.

"I beg to be allowed to remain here," he said firmly as he handed over the fatal papers, in which the hospital authorities stated unequivocally that he should be demobbed due to grave injury. "I'm still strong enough to manage the elephant. Let me return to the barracks now. By the way I would like to know in which hut I shall be sleeping?"

Then as though in fear that his demand would be refused, he unobtrusively tucked away the empty sleeve under his belt in a attempt to hide it from view.

"I still have one arm that can hold a lance," he said with feeling as he fondled the lance the old mahout had returned to him. "Don't force me to leave our unit, to leave my Lomluong again. When our enemy has been completely routed then I'll be willing to go home with the elephant."

EPILOGUE

So Dik was not demobilised. He remained in the army with his beloved Lomluong.

After some days' rest, he drove the elephant to a new destination for the start of a new campaign.

Since his master's return to the unit Lomluong was invariably sweet, wise and contented and followed the armymen in their endless wanderings. The two wounds behind its ears were soon only two big scars. The elephant looked younger again. There were innumerable war exploits to its credit. As for its master, the mahout Dik of Truong Son battalion, a mature and seasoned combatant, he was in the course of time admitted to the Viet Nam Workers' Party...

In 1954, Dik and Lomluong returned to their village where at last Dik settled down, married and had a son of his own. Now together with the Takhan villagers, the family seemed set to build a new life.

That was 1954. Who among them then could have foreseen that it would not be long before the cruel

lackeys of the American-Diem regime[1] showed their faces in the village.

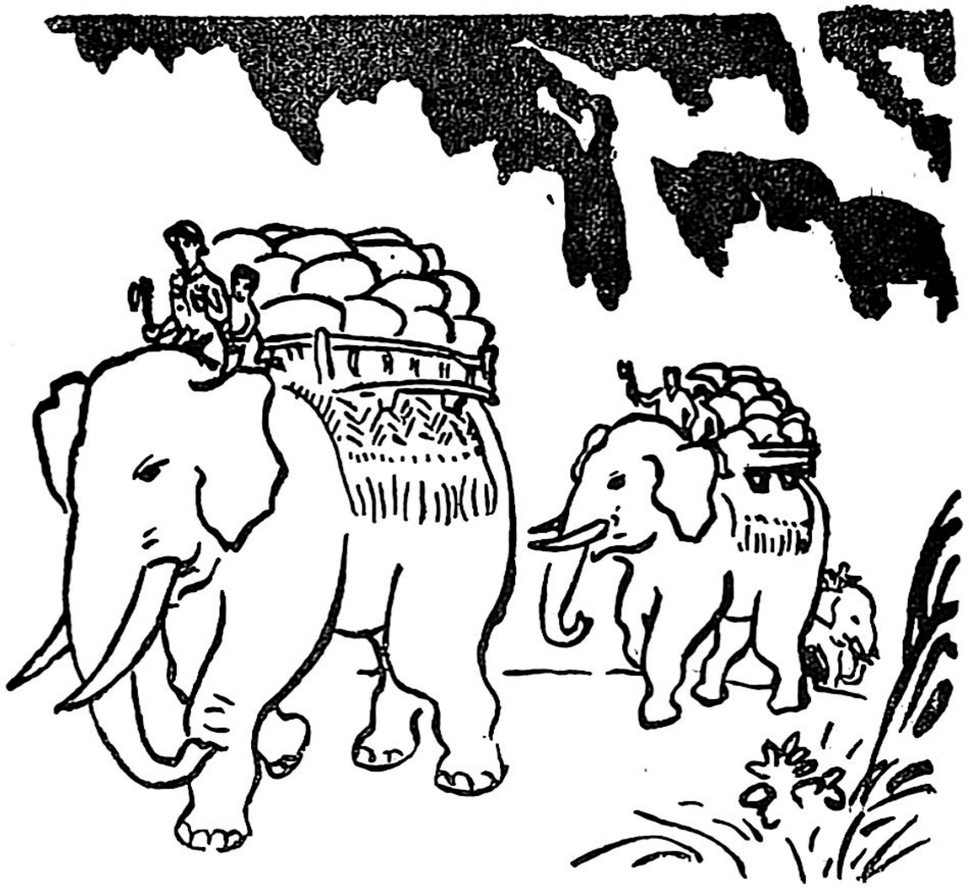
Dik could never live under their cruel yoke. He put his little family on Lomluong's back and drove into the jungle looking for the men of the Liberation army.

They found the men and joined their ranks. Father and son have been again working in a transport unit and now, in the fight against the Americans for national salvation, those who move along the Truong Son trails will every now and then meet up with a convoy of transport elephants. Just try to take a good look at the elephant in the van which is carrying a mahout and a young sturdy boy on its back. You can see that the elephant is no longer in its first youth, it will be poised and deliberate in its movements. There's nothing special about it, you would say. Even the load on its back seems no heavier than those on other elephants' backs.

But if you were to stop and observe the way it leads the rest of the herd, you might think otherwise.

It walks with long and steady steps. Its enormous ears are constantly on the move to pick up any strange noises while its trunk keeps moving right and left and up and down searching for unusual scents. All of a sudden it stops. It has just got the feeling that there's something amiss and it will notify the mahout about it.

1. Ngo Dinh Diem, head of the puppet administration in Saigon. He was killed in a coup d'état in 1963.



The mahout turns around and makes a gesture with his only arm. The herd come to a halt instantly and each elephant gets under cover behind the jungle trees.

The elephant in the van steps cautiously forward. The mahout and the boy dart their eyes alertly about, straining their ears, holding their breath. Like their elephant, they are making the most of their senses to discover any hidden danger. The elephant treads lightly on the ground, swinging its trunk. The other elephants and mahouts strain their

necks watching it as it calmly proceeds along the dangerous trail till it vanishes among the trees.

It might be some time before they hear a bellow from afar. The signal that the trail is clear. The whole herd then resume their march, confident and sure-footed.

The elephant in the lead is Lomluong, the mahout, Dik, and the boy, his son. Of course you've recognised them already...

There may be quite a few wild beasts and thorny thickets and who knows perhaps some of the enemy rangers are lying in ambush here and there. But with such a magnificent elephant and a mahout as experienced as Dik in the lead, what is there for the herd to fear ?

A quarter of a century has gone by since the beginning of the resistance and there is never a day of peace for those heroic mahouts and their elephants. And so long as the Resistance goes on, you can rest assured that they are still transporting arms and ammunition along the numerous trails of the Truong Son range.

* The Vietnamese original of this story was first published in 1973, before the victorious end of the resistance against U.S. aggression.

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